THE CAPTAIN AND THE KINGS

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THE CAPTAIN
AND
THE KINGS

A PUBLIC SCHOOL STORY

BY

R. A. H. GOODYEAR

AUTHOR OF
"WITH WAT AT WINTERGLEAM"
"UP AGAINST THE SCHOOL" ETC.

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THE CAPTAIN AND THE KINGS

CHAPTER I

A NEW SCHOOL'S SENSATIONS

"Swift as a shadow, short as any dream;
Brief as the lightning in the collied night."
SHAKESPEARE: *Midsummer Night's Dream.*

AT ten p.m., on the twentieth day of September, every boy in the new Ashwinnin School had settled down for the night. At eleven-thirty p.m. lightning struck King's House, and an avalanche of plaster descended on the beds of the sleepers in the Sixth-form rooms.

"I say, this is a fine kick-off, you fellows," cried Harry Wiske, staggering into the corridor. "*Pouf!* I'm nearly choked. If you think I'm jay enough to stand a rag like this on the very first night of term——"

"Shut up, man, whoever you are," said Rex Walworth, his next-door neighbour. "This is no rag. It's a thunderstorm. Listen!"

An awful crash of thunder drowned the medley of frightened voices in the dust-clouded corridor. Masters hurried upstairs in sketchy night attire, to find bedroom doors opened everywhere, and the sort of mess

inside each room which people have experienced when bombs have been rained on them from the skies.

The lightning-stroke had travelled the whole length of the wing, splitting the ceiling as one would burst open a pod of peas, and making it impossible to draw a free breath amid the floating particles of new plaster.

"Yet there's a lightning-conductor on the building," said Mr. Boon, the housemaster. "How extraordinary!"

He won a name at once as a housemaster of resource by dashing downstairs to turn on a better supply of light. His touch on the central switch illuminated the rooms throughout, and a reassuring brightness dispelled the murky gloom of the corridor.

"This is literally a stroke of misfortune, boys," Mr. Boon said, with admirable coolness. "Our first night at Ashwinnin may be called a memorable one. You all seem to have escaped injury, though the white plaster has made jolly millers of you. There's a plentiful supply of hot water in the bathrooms. Have a dip, please, while I find beds for you elsewhere."

In this calm and practical manner Mr. Boon knocked panic on the head. He had won battlefield decorations for dealing with worse situations than lightning-cracked ceilings, and there was a twinkle in his eye which rather suggested a humorous side to the affair.

"It is fortunate the Headmaster hasn't arrived yet, Mr.—Mr.—" He turned to one of the undermasters. "Stupid of me to forget your name so soon, but we're all at sixes and sevens to-day."

"I am Sheppey, the Maths. master, sir," the younger man smilingly answered.

"Ah, yes, the Cantab, of course! Give me the aid

of your mathematical mind in fitting the victims of the storm into other bedrooms, Mr. Sheppey, please. An odd jumble of juvenile humanity, aren't they ? "

" Rather a queer assortment, sir," Mr. Sheppey smiled.

" What better could we expect in a brand-new school ? (Come this way ; we must get these scared youngsters back to their dormitories ; they're running about like ants.) Many of the bigger boys are misfits from other schools. Not throw-outs or wasters—we sifted the applications too thoroughly for that—but lads who couldn't shake down where they were.

" Their people gave us all manner of reasons for wanting a change. (Twelve empty beds, well-aired, in this big room, thank goodness.) Pennin, for instance—that weirdly solemn youth with a head like a diver's helmet—had to leave a school on the West coast because he would persist in swimming too far out to sea. They got weary of rescuing him from a watery grave. At Ashwinnin we have only a canal, which won't be so seductive as the deep blue ocean. (Here are more unoccupied beds : wonderfully well-furnished house, is it not ?)

" Another boy took an intense dislike to the smell of the lavender fields near his school, and resigned a monitorship to come here. There are scores of such mildly freakish cases, but I feel sure none of us lacks the pluck to tackle them. I rather look forward to the fun of it myself ! "

The animated housemaster made a quick tour of the bedrooms as he talked in this cheery strain to the masters accompanying him, and when the big boys returned from tubbing he knew just where he wished them to spend the night.

"The thunderstorm has passed," he concluded by saying, "so off you go to sleep, everybody. We don't want to be yawning over our first day's work, do we?"

"No, sir," the boys dutifully chanted.

He switched off the lights and went, and when all was still again a low voice from the end bed said:

"I guess he's a keen file."

"He'll make us sap like the very dickens," another boy grumbled.

"But he's a cheery old card," a third boy declared.

"Oh, rather!" three or four other fellows agreed.

"What's his name? Anybody know?"

"Gunnersbury Boon."

"Too big a mouthful. I shall call him the Gunner, and chance it."

"Topping title, old man. The Gunner it is!"

And then the boys, who had come to Ashwinnin from all parts of Britain, and were still strangers to one another, conversed eagerly in the darkness about the school—its football and hockey prospects, its possibilities in the food department, its likelihood of being one of those "painfully new holes" where work took precedence to play—until a sharp knock on the door, almost as startling as the thunder, was followed by the voice of the Gunner, firmly forbidding them to speak another syllable until morning.

"Hot stuff, the Gunner!" somebody sighed, and none had the courage to deny it.

CHAPTER II

RIVAL CODES

"Now join your hands, and with your hands your hearts,
That no dissension hinder government."

SHAKESPEARE: *Henry VI.*

A VERY grave architect examined the lightning-conductor and reported that its copper foundations had not been embedded deeply enough.

"The contractors must carefully relay it and repair the cracked roof at their own expense," he declared. "I am glad nothing worse came of it, Mr. Boon."

"Superstitious people would call it an unlucky start for a new school," the housemaster replied.

"Quite a unique occurrence, my dear sir. Rest assured that it will not happen again. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place."

Harry Wiske overheard this conversation and repeated it in the Sixth-form Common Room.

"There was no end of gas in the prospectus about every boy in Big School having a bedroom to himself," he complained. "Then they begin by jamming us together in a Fourth-form dormitory, where a fellow can't get to sleep for hearing other fellows jaw all night long."

"You should stop 'em talking, Wiske," Walworth said.

"I would, jolly quick, too, if they'd make me a prefect."

"Or captain of the school," Walworth dryly suggested.

"Well, and why not? Don't think I'm boasting, but I *was* captain of Beeforth's College when the trustees suddenly closed it."

"That's rather a bad omen for us, then, if you're going to be captain here."

"Why is it, Walworth? I'm not sweet on 'sarc,' remember, and I've got a rough way with men when I'm roused."

"No offence, I'm sure," Walworth drawled. "I only hoped, if you became skipper, that this school wouldn't have to shut up suddenly too. We've already been struck by lightning."

There was a ripple of laughter at the sally. These two boys, so great a contrast in appearance—one fair-haired and amber-eyed, the other sharp-featured and dark—had been verbally sparring almost from the moment they met, and it was clear that the clash of wills between them would provide mild entertainment for the Sixth form.

Both obviously expected to be given authority in the new school, though it did not seem likely that they would ever be able to work harmoniously together in its mutual interests.

"You two fellows had better hold hard for a bit. Nothing's settled yet. This school's to be run on up-to-date lines. It may not be the intention to have pres. Who knows that we shall have a captain at all?"

It was Burns who said all this. He was an expansive youth with a platform manner, beating the palm of his right hand with his left fist to drive home each point of his speech. That was why Ashwinnin after-

wards named him " Daddy Burns," in sly recognition of his " heavy father " manner.

" True," said Blenkin major. " We haven't even got a Headmaster so far."

Blenkin major was partially crippled. His right arm had been amputated below the elbow, and in its place he wore a well-contrived artificial limb. By keeping his dummy hand in his pocket, he had been so successful in hiding it that few of his new schoolfellows were yet aware of his disability. They were to learn later how amazingly dexterous that stump of a limb could be at times.

" Oh, the Headmaster ! I know all about *him*," said Wiske.

" And about everything else," murmured Walworth. " Cyclopædia Wiske ! "

" He's called Dr. Vollum, and the reason he isn't here is because they're keeping him in London to sit on some big committee or other."

" Is he that sort of person ? "

" What sort of person ? "

" The sort that sits on people ? If so, he won't half squash poor little us ! "

" Chuck it, Walworth ! Be serious for once, man. My pater was at the same 'Varsity as Dr. Vollum, and he says the school's jolly lucky to get such a sound man. He'll be worth waiting a week or two for."

" I'll wait a term or two for him, gladly."

The comment came from Blenkin major, and he and Walworth exchanged appreciative glances over Wiske's head. The would-be captain of Ashwinnin looked like having a time of it between them !

Other reflections on the Head's absence were stilled by the entrance of Mr. Malt, the Schoolhouse master,

who announced an immediate meeting in the Assembly Hall. Taking the chair himself, he affably introduced the masters one by one—a very necessary ceremony in a school which was still in the chrysalis stage, with classes only half-formed and preliminary tests of knowledge still to be made.

"Now that we know one another," the Schoolhouse master said, "we shall rub along pleasantly after a while. Rome was not built in a day, nor a new school fashioned in a week. We must sort ourselves out by degrees. Now to the business of the evening."

He turned to confer with Mr. Boon, and Blenkin major took the opportunity to whisper:

"There's one master he hasn't introduced to us—the lanky fellow on the left."

Wiske gave him a look of pitying scorn. "Some people," he answered, "don't know a beak from a baronet. The man you mean doesn't need to shout his throat sore for a living. He's Sir Oswald Dyde, worth a cool million pounds if a penny."

"A millionaire! Then what's he doing here?"

"More ignorance! Happens to be the founder of the school, that's all. Bought and paid for every brick of it."

Blenkin major tried to seem unimpressed, but he passed the information along, nevertheless, and the lanky gentleman on the left soon became the object of curious scrutiny. A millionaire who builds schools for a hobby is certainly worth a second glance.

"We are now going to ask the meeting to consider the question of sport," the Schoolhouse master said.

"Hear, hear!" cried several hopeful voices.

"As you doubtless know, no master of games has

so far been appointed. We therefore wish you to decide for yourselves which games you will play this season. Some of you may fancy a bit of football——"

"Not half, sir!" a daring youth interrupted, and in a loud chorus of "Hear, hears" the school backed him up.

"But there are two codes of football," Mr. Malt continued, "and our playing-fields are still too much in the rough to afford space for both. The important question is, which code will you have?"

"Soccer, sir!"

"Rugger, sir!"

"Precisely," was the housemaster's dry comment. "Some boys play one game, some the other, and we don't propose taking a vote to decide which code has the most supporters. We want cordial agreement on the matter. Will some boy set the ball rolling by stating his preference, please?"

As a rule, one has to wait a little while before an invitation of this kind is accepted. But Ashwinnin contained one boy, at least, who had no diffidence about airing his views. Harry Wiske was on his feet instantly, crushing Blenkin major's toes in his eagerness to catch the chairman's eye.

"Soccer is my choice, sir," he began. "It's heaps better than Rugger in lots of ways. A more open game, sir, with a ball that *is* a ball, not a thing like an ostrich egg, which bounces anywhere and everywhere but where you expect it to——"

Loud cries of "Rot!" from indignant Ruggerites rendered the completion of the sentence inaudible, and Mr. Malt indicated to him, by dumb show, that he must resume his seat, which he reluctantly did, drawing comfort from the fact that the lanky gentle-

man on the platform had laughed hugely over his description of the oval football.

"That is one opinion, boys, very frankly put," the Schoolhouse master said. "Now we'll hear the other side. Will any boy speak for Rugger, please?"

Walworth rose. King's House men expected that he would, and winked at one another in chuckling anticipation of something peppery. They were sure he would take the opposite side to Wiske, whether he really cared for Rugger or not.

"I differ entirely from the man who's just spoken," he said. "It's because a Rugger ball bounces so queerly that there's greater skill in catching it and kicking it. Soccer's all very well for fellows with thin arms and thick heads" (cries of dissent amid shouts of laughter), "but the man who wants to use his body and his brains knows Rugger's the only game for him. Give us the handling code at Ashwinnin, I say."

He got a cheer for this pungent speech, and could also congratulate himself on having moved to mirth the long-legged gentleman on the dais, who positively shook with laughter.

A broad-shouldered Schoolhouse boy now rose to advocate Rugger—most Schoolhouse men seemed to prefer that code—and in a short time fellows were bobbing up all over the place to put in a warm word for their favourite code. Opinions were so evenly divided on the matter that it looked like a case of "fifty-fifty," as an American would say, and Mr. Malt was at last compelled to hold up both hands and call laughingly for order.

"Disjointed sentences are of little use to us," he protested. "Merely to say 'I like Soccer,' or 'let's have Rugger,' is not argument. Before summing

things up I will allow one more speaker on each side, but he must state his views clearly and concisely. Bear in mind that it is a question of which game Ashwinnin should play, and it is no answer to say ' Soccer, because we played it at my old school,' or ' Rugger, because I like it.' Bexon, you were the first boy I greeted in the Schoolhouse, and you have twice attempted to speak. Try again."

Bexon blushed vividly, but made a plea for Rugger which the Schoolhouse loudly cheered. It was rapidly gaining popularity all over the country, he said, and in towns which had been Soccer-mad for years they were now starting successful amateur Rugby clubs. " And Rugger is much more played than Soccer at the 'Varsities," he rounded off his case by saying.

" Very well expressed," was Mr. Malt's honestly-meant commendation. " It would be fitting, Mr. Boon, if one of your boys would now say a final word for Soccer, which King's House seems rather to prefer."

The Gunner ran his eye speculatively along the row of chairs occupied by his seniors, and nodded to a boy in the middle. " Are you a Soccerite, Gwynn ? " he asked.

" I like both games, sir, but I think Soccer should be played here," was the quiet answer.

" Then stand up and say why."

Gwynn, like Bexon, rose shyly, but spoke without conscious effort. " Well, sir, there's not much fun unless you have a decent fixture-list to keep things going, and you can't get many Rugger matches in this part of the country. Most of the schools play Soccer. St. Placid's do, and they're in the same town, so we're sure of a couple of matches with them."

"They won't play us," a pessimist shouted.

Gwynn ignored the interruption. "Ramsdale Grammar School are Soccer men, and they're advertising for matches in the *Shires' Morning Mercury*," he calmly went on. "Weaponess College run three Soccer teams: we ought to be good enough for their second eleven at least. Ringing Ravine School is only ten miles away: it wouldn't cost much to go there. To meet the Rugby-playing teams would mean much longer journeys, sir; we couldn't get a match within thirty miles."

Mr. Malt raised his eyebrows as he glanced across at Mr. Boon. "You seem to have worked it all out, Gwynn," he remarked. "Do you live in this district?"

"No, sir, but I've spent the summer holidays around here." Gwynn's sunburnt cheeks took on a deeper colour as he answered the pointed query.

"Ah, that accounts for it! You made mental notes of the other schools, naturally. Most useful information, Gwynn. I rather think it puts Rugger out of the hunt, don't you, Mr. Boon?" The Gunner nodded in agreement. "Personally, I'm sorry to say it," Mr. Malt continued, "because there is an obvious majority of Rugger men in my house."

"We want Rugger, sir," the Schoolhouse mournfully bleated.

"Soccer, sir!" King's House retaliated by shouting.

"Have a show of hands, sir."

"Pass voting-papers round, sir."

"We must be practical and bow to circumstances," Mr. Malt replied. "Ashwinnin is on a branch railway-line, with a poor afternoon service, so long journeys are out of the question. Soccer is the prevailing code

in school football hereabouts. I appeal to all Rugger men, therefore, to sink their prejudices from this moment, and to take up Soccer enthusiastically for the good of the school."

A small section of discontented Schoolhouse men groaned dejectedly, but in the main the decision was treated as a commonsense one, though it would have been wiser if King's had not so heartily cheered the triumph of its favourite code.

"Shut up, you noisy bounders!" snapped a disgruntled Schoolhouse champion. He glared at Harry Wiske, whose vociferous delight had turned him scarlet. "If we'd known this was a Soccer centre, we'd never have come to the beastly hole."

"Well, hop it off home again, old man," Wiske blandly answered. "We can carry on without you, quite easily."

Which was scarcely a tactfully pacific remark from the lips of one who lived in hopes of being Ashwinnin's first captain.

CHAPTER III

THE CAPTAIN'S ORDEAL

"Give me the avowed, the erect, the manly foe,
Bold I can meet—perhaps may turn his blow!"
GEORGE CANNING: *New Morality.*

THE school notice board in Hall was a broadly elaborate affair, divided into well-defined sections.

"Schoolhouse Notices" and "King's House Notices" monopolised the glass compartments nearest the entrance. The uncovered section in the middle was simply headed "Games," the end section being assigned to "Indoor Societies and Amusements."

"Hope they've given us space enough," sarcastically remarked Blenkin major.

"We shall need theatre-bills and soap-advertisements to fill it up," Walworth said.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Wiske replied. "We may be cramped for room before long. I'm starting a few societies myself."

"No doubt," Walworth sneered. "Is one an Encyclopædia-reading club, by any chance?"

"Or a General Information Bureau?" Blenkin major skitted.

"Go on—have your fling, you two," Wiske unconcernedly retorted. "You may take liberties now——"

"But we'll shiver in our shoes when the Head comes

along and recognises your genius—just so ! " Walworth gibed.

These wordy duels between them were so frequent and diverting that members of both houses used to come quietly up and listen. This suited the rivals, who liked an audience. They were briskly whetting their wits on each other when Mr. Balsam, the Classical master, strode to the notice board and unlocked the headmaster's section of it.

" Hello ! " a Schoolhouse man whispered. " News of the Old Man's arrival at last."

" That means collarwork for us all," whispered another apprehensive boy.

It was no telegram which Mr. Balsam fixed to the board, however, but a sheet of foolscap, almost as mortifying in its import to Wiske as if it had signified his expulsion. He was the first to read it when Mr. Balsam had gone, and his widening eyes reflected his thoughts transparently.

" This is a facer, men," he gasped—" a smack in the mouth. Did you ever see such a beastly fizzle in all your lives ? "

" We'll tell you when we've read it," Walworth said. " Who can see through a thatch of straw, which is what your head reminds me of ? Stand aside, there's a good man."

The curiosity that burned within him was masked by an inscrutable smile as he read out the announcement for the supposed benefit of those behind him, who could see as well as he could. The perturbing notice ran as shown on the next page.

Few things are swifter than the gathering of a crowd when excitement is in the air. A dozen fellows heard the commencement of Walworth's reading ; a surging

throng of boys flattened him against the notice board before he had finished. One and all expressed profound astonishment.

AUTUMN TERM, ASHWINNIN SCHOOL.

The Headmaster, in conjunction with the Housemasters, has made the following appointments for the Autumn term :—

Captain of School and Games	Wilfred Gwynn.
Prefects of King's House .	G. C. M. Burns.
	P. Leatham.
	Rex Walworth.
Head Prefect of Schoolhouse	T. A. Bexon.
Prefects of Schoolhouse . .	Fell major.
	M. MacAllister.
	D. Summerscales.

It should be distinctly understood that these are temporary appointments, which will come up for review at the end of the term. A librarianship is vacant, and applications for this post should be made without delay to Mr. Rosebank, English Master.

(*Signed*) Colin Vollum,
Headmaster.

"Wilfred Gwynn : who's he ? "

"What's *he* done to be made captain ? "

"Yes, more than anybody else ? "

"He's the speechmaking fellow that put the lid on Rugger."

"Beastly Soccerite ! "

"A hot-air merchant."

"King's chin-wagger."

"A Schoolhouse man ought to be captain : he always was at my school."

"Besides, I thought the Headmaster hadn't come."

"Nobody's seen him."

"Must have flown here and landed on the roof."

"Sheer, blind guesswork, choosing this crew."

"Sticking pins into a list of names—you know the game, you men—and the one that's pricked wins."

"Where is this talking man—this Wilfred Gwynn? Wonder if he knows what he's up against?"

The lofty question came from the tallest boy in the crowd—an angular and spectacled King's man named Guyes, the tip of whose nose (as red as his cheeks were white) suggested unhygienic feeding and chronic indigestion.

There was a slight stir on the fringe of the crowd, and a voice which sounded familiar to some of them answered pleasantly:

"I've been here most of the time, you fellows."

"The dickens you have!" exclaimed Guyes, looking foolish.

"Sorry my appointment doesn't give satisfaction: I didn't seek it."

"Oh, no, not half!" Harry Wiske flung the bitter retort at him from the front of the throng. "Swotting up school biz in the holidays to steal a march on us all—that's how you worked it, Gwynn."

"Did I? You seem to know."

"Cyclo Wiske knows everything," Walworth said, "by instinct."

Wiske made a face at him. "You're another of them that's shoved your head in, jaw first," he inelegantly hit back. "Nice old muddle you've made of it amongst you! Prefects picked with a pin."

"How original!" Walworth taunted him. "Gentleman on the right said something to the same effect recently—or did I dream it?"

"It's all a leap in the dark," Wiske hastened to continue. "I ask you, men, how could Dr. Vollum know who were fit to be pres. when he wasn't there?"

"Wasn't where?" Gwynn blandly inquired.

"At the meeting."

"But he was."

The brief, half-laughing declaration brought all eyes into focus on Gwynn. He reddened under the embarrassing scrutiny, but maintained his easy bearing.

"I say, don't talk rot," Wiske expostulated. "Old Maltkin ran the show and introduced everybody to us."

"Not quite. He didn't name the gentleman with the long legs, for instance——"

"But I did."

"Yes—you told us he was Sir Oswald Dyde, the school's founder. Who'd been pulling your leg, Wiske? That was Dr. Vollum, let me tell you."

"Never!"

"All right: you'll know to-morrow, if not sooner. Look here, you men, I'm not trying to make another speech—some of you thought my first one rather a sickener, I know—but I put it to you straight: if one of you had been pitchforked into the Head's study, as I was this afternoon, and told you were to be captain of the school and games, what would you have said?"

"'No, thanks,' jolly quick," a Schoolhouse man suggested.

"I *did* say that, four or five times, but the Old Man waved me down with his hands—like this—and told me I should soon get used to it. Perhaps you think I'm jumping glad about it. Well, you're wrong. If I'd had the least notion what he wanted me for, I'd have bolted like a rabbit to the railway-station and

boarded a train—scrambled into a coal-truck even—to get away!"

"Don't believe you!" a sceptic snorted.

"Don't, then: I'm not bothered. There are lots of fitter fellows for the job than I——"

"Sure!" Wiske boldly interrupted.

"I can't see you very well up there, Wiske," was the serene answer. "I wish you were nearer. Thanks, men; I can get closer to our friend now."

He passed briskly along the lane they made for him, and quite good-humouredly confronted his rival.

"You thought you'd be made captain here, didn't you, Wiske?"

"I might as well confess it—yes," Wiske frankly returned.

"And you think that the Doctor chanced his arm a good deal in choosing me?"

"I certainly do."

"So do I! So do bunches of other men, I dare say. You'd have still been captain of your last school if it hadn't closed down, wouldn't you, Wiske?"

"I've said so, and it's true."

"Wasn't doubting it. And you fancy it would be a sound plan for me, who didn't seek the captaincy and don't want it, to go back to the Head and tell him he's overlooked a better man?"

"Why, of course, Gwynn: if you see it in that light, it would."

"And I'd do it like a shot—for a better man. I'd be more than thankful to hand over the captaincy this minute—to a better man. There must be heaps of better men, as I said before. The difficulty is, though, that you're not one of them, Wiske."

"What!" Wiske spluttered. "Me not a better

man than you? Oh, Cæsar! You've got a nerve, Gwynn. You've set everybody gaping. And no wonder! Why, I'd back myself to beat you at any game or any subject under the sun. You don't look a captain, Gwynn, not by miles. Where's his build, men? Where's his style?"

There was some point in the inferred comparison. Wiske was the bigger boy of the two, and certainly the handsomer. Gwynn had no claim to good looks at all, unless a smiling mouth and even rows of white teeth counted for something. His nose was too large and his neck rather too short, and you could not have said off-hand what colour his eyes were—only that they were quite a kindly pair, of a nondescript shade of grey, perhaps. He would pass in a crowd, as the saying is, and that was all.

He smiled tolerantly at Wiske's egotistical outburst. "I see that you're rather making up your mind to be an awkward customer," he said. "I honestly expected a quiet time here, but you'll watch that I don't go to sleep, won't you, Wiske?"

"I'll poke you up all the while, never fear, and push you clean out of things at the finish," Wiske stoutly declared.

There was absolute conviction in his tone—everyone could see that he was sure he could make his assertion good. Physically, he had the pull by inches, both in height and breadth. Mentally, he had a bright outlook on things—was clear-eyed and "quick in the uptake." Some of the fellows watched him admiringly and listened to him open-mouthed, willing enough to take him at his own valuation.

"He *would* look a jolly sight better captain," Guyes said nasally.

This open championship of the bigger man was a lead to the waverers, who said, "Oh, rather," in varying degrees of support. Walworth and Blenkin major threw their weight into the other scale by laughing ironically, and those nearest the newly-appointed captain heard him draw a sharp breath as he took a half-step towards Wiske, with his left hand drawn back and doubled.

"Shove as hard as you like, Wiske; I don't mind," he replied. "One of us wants the job, the other doesn't. But I've taken it on now, and neither you nor anybody else will stop me going through with it."

"Hear, hear!" said Walworth.

"Good man," said Blenkin major.

"You'll not boss me and my chums, anyhow." Wiske swept a proprietary arm, in a majestic semi-circle, towards Guyes and those around him. "We'll look after ourselves."

"Yes, lose yourselves if you like, but don't go putting your oar into anything that concerns my work as captain, that's all. I won't allow that."

"What'll you do to stop it, Gwynn?"

"Time will tell."

"You'll do a fat lot, I'm sure. No time like the present—nothing like getting a move on. If I gave you a thundering good slap on the face—here and now, in front of the whole jolly crush—would you turn the other cheek or not?"

"One never knows," was the cool answer. "You'd better get a move on, as you say, and see!"

A thrill of fearful delight quivered through the throng. Life in a brand-new school need not be devoid of incident, after all. If you can pit two of your top-

notchers against each other at the commencement, much may be forthcoming in the way of robust entertainment.

Wiske flushed with sudden fury. "Get back, you fellows—give me elbow-room," he demanded. "I'll settle this affair out of hand."

His pose was that of a Samson in an oratorio—"I could kill thee at a blow" sort of thing—as he jerked up his fist with the deliberate intention of crashing it into Gwynn's face. But those whose expectant eyes were on him saw a swift change come over his wrathful features as he gazed fixedly over their heads at some object behind them. A silly, apologetic smile took the place of his wrathful grimaces, and he let his arm fall to his side as if a bone had snapped in it.

"What's up?" a few of the boys asked, speaking together.

The backs of the crowd's heads became now a sea of faces, all looking for the cause of the strange interruption. They saw, drawn up against the other wall, the long, lean figure of the Headmaster—he whom Wiske had led them into thinking was the comparatively unimportant founder of the school.

Half-stifled exclamations greeted the newcomer. How long had he been standing there and how much had he seen and heard? It was a riddle without a solution, because he made not the slightest reference to what had happened. His clean-shaven lips were twisted a little at one corner as he looked the crowd over, seeming to catch and hold the eye of each unit individually, so that all felt equally and indescribably guilty.

"Good evening, boys," he flurried them by saying.

There was nothing suggestive of a mellow vesper-

bell in the response to his grim salutation. Their "Good evening, sir" had a cracked and tremulous sound, and they waited in strained suspense to see what his next move would be. Yet when he spoke he was studiously courteous to them.

"Allow me to make myself known, boys," he said. "I am Colin Vollum, Headmaster of this school. You have seen me before, I think, at your football meeting. I arrived in time for that, and took the opportunity of seeing what manner of boys you were. I formed certain opinions, with which my housemasters fortunately agreed. A summary of our deliberations appears on the notice board. You have read it, I hope?"

"Yes, sir," they soberly answered.

"Thank you! Certain boys are named there as prefects, and one boy as captain of the school and games. You may not know them as yet—we are all strangers here—but I ask you to combine with them in every effort which is made for the good of Ashwinnin. Will you?"

"Yes, sir," about half of them managed to answer.

"Help them to maintain order; aid them to do Ashwinnin honour both in and out of doors; lighten their responsible duties by cheerful acquiescence in all their just requests. Strive always to gain for your new school a name for efficiency and good sportsmanship, so that we shall not suffer by comparison with the very much older schools around us. Will you promise to do all this for Ashwinnin?"

"Yes, sir!" The reply was sincere enough, but not altogether unanimous, as the Head could not fail to observe.

"That is good," he went on. "We have a hard voyage to take together before we can run into smooth waters. Our machinery is new, our crew is a mixed one, and we are sure to get out of our course now and again. But we must never stand in each other's way; we must always look charitably on another man's mistakes and help him to correct them—in short, pull together for all we are worth until we are in complete harmony. Then Ashwinnin will become a school of which we shall be proud, looking back upon it in after years with heartfelt affection, considering it as much our Alma Mater as if it were as many centuries old as Eton and almost as venerable as Harrow. 'All for School—School for All': that shall be our English motto, and I charge you to remember it loyally each morning when you awake, and to carry it to rest with you each night. 'All for School—School for All': just that."

Finishing on this high note, he opened a classroom door and was gone in an instant, having effectually quenched the last lingering fires of pugnacity in the eyes of the captain and his rival.

"Look here, Wiske, if I've said anything that's touched you on the raw, I'm sorry about it," Gwynn said impulsively. "What he tells us is right—we must all pull together. Let's begin again, shall we, and shake hands on it?"

He put out his hand freely and generously, knowing himself to be less in the wrong than Wiske, and it would have been more than a shame if such a fair advance had been repulsed.

Wiske had too much commonsense, despite his strongly jealous instincts, to play the fool now. He allowed his hand to be taken and shaken warmly,

murmured a few inaudible sentiments, and left the scene of his discomfiture under the doubtfully comforting wing of Guyes. Gwynn threaded his way out without speaking to any one, and spent a solitary evening in his study.

"They shan't say I'm forming a clique of some sort," he reflected. "If I'm going to be captain of a mixed crew, as the Old Man calls 'em, I mustn't be too free with them at first!"

CHAPTER IV

A SNUB FOR THE NEW SCHOOL

"No man less proud than he,
Nor cared for homage less."
LIONEL JOHNSON: *A Friend.*

THE captain of St. Placid's was true to that ancient school's immemorial type. He had lots of dignity, heaps of self-esteem, an unimpeachable school record, a military mode of dealing with offenders, and yet was, at heart, one of the very best fellows in the world.

As captain of football he led into action weekly a team which had few equals in contemporary school life. It had to be a very unlucky day for them if they lost a game. Accidents were usually responsible for the rare defeats they sustained, and they always cherished the hope of going through a season without yielding a single goal—an ideal which they had come very near to achieving in the first season of Bruce Marchmont's captaincy.

The shock to his dignity can therefore be faintly realised when he received from the new school at Ashwinnin, half a mile away, a challenge to football combat.

There was no deference whatever about the challenge. Plainly worded and fearlessly straightforward, it asked for "home and away matches" with St. Placid's first team—not the third or the second team even, but the mighty and almost invincible First!

The captain came near to losing the self-control on which he plumed himself as he looked about him angrily for writing materials.

"Where on earth has young Flathers hidden the inkhorn? And the notepaper? And the envelopes? All spirited away! His finicky habits would drive some fellows crazy. I want to write this Ashwinnin man a stinger while I'm in the mood. It shall go back to him like a boomerang. What frozen cheek!"

He rummaged here and there at great speed, upsetting everything but finding nothing, and all the while angrily commenting on Wilfred Gwynn's cool challenge.

"Jumped-up mushrooms, those Ashwinnin fellows! They'll have to be sat on, straight off the reel. Now where, in the name of fortune, *has* Flathers put my fountain-pen?"

He could not trace it, but came at last upon an unused picture-postcard, representing the ruins of the Abbey Gateway at St. Placid's.

"Oh, well, this must do," he resignedly decided. "Why waste space and words? Good luck! here's a stump of lead-pencil. Now for a piece of chilly politeness—a cold-drawn snub. Let me see, how shall I put it? Oh, I know!"

He wetted the pencil to make the writing blacker, and scribbled this answer on the postcard:

"In reply to yours, I beg to say we have no dates to offer you.

(*Signed*) "BRUCE MARCHMONT,
"St. Placid's F.C."

He addressed and stamped the card and ran downstairs with it, just beating the collecting postman by

a neck. Then he resolved that, instead of mentioning it to his sixth-form colleagues, he would wipe the incident from his mind, as one does one's utmost to blot out the memory of a bad dream.

In due course the postcard, addressed simply to "the Captain, Ashwinnin School," was delivered at Ashwinnin and carried by a maid into Hall. Who took it from her there was a mystery—probably she did not know the captain either by sight or name—yet the recipient of it was at no pains to pass it on to the addressee. He propped it up on the mantelpiece, where every boy who spotted it thought himself entitled to see if it were addressed to him. In twenty minutes twenty men had read it, and they didn't feel it incumbent on them to keep quiet about it, either.

After all, what *is* the etiquette to observe when other people's postcards are left in public places? An Irishman, tradition says, once marked a postcard "Private," thereby doubtless causing it to be read oftener than it would otherwise have been. One shouldn't really write on a postcard anything which one is sensitive of being seen: it may conceivably pass through a dozen or more hands before it reaches the right person, and phrenologists tell us that human curiosity forms a conspicuous bump on the average person's cranium!

The fault lay with Bruce Marchmont in not putting his curt refusal into a sealed envelope, and the natural assumption was that the captain of St. Placid's wanted it to be seen and talked about.

It certainly *was* talked about. The wag of the Schoolhouse, a fifth-form "funny dog" named Paddock, who had thrown the boys into fits of subdued laughter at dinner by playing table-golf with some

very hard-boiled peas, made loudly facetious comments on the card's contents.

"The noble gent says he has no dates for us. How about asking if he can spare a few bananas—or nuts?"

The laughter which rewarded this somewhat cheap jest drew Bexon's attention to the group round the fireplace.

Bexon, in common with the other pres., had been shy of using his powers, but to-day he felt in a more aggressive mood.

"Stow that row," he commanded. "You ought to be scared to laugh so noisily with such jackass's ears as those, Paddock. What have you got in your hand?"

"A picture-postcard, Bexon."

"A daft sketch of somebody's fat aunt, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, Bexon; quite a sad one."

"You behave as if it were! Shove it into your pocket and stop acting the goat."

"It isn't mine, Bexon."

"Then return it to its owner."

"He's never had it yet. It's for the captain."

"In that case, you've a rare old sauce to be messing about with it. I'm just going across to King's myself. Hand it here: I'll take it to Gwynn."

Paddock relinquished the postcard readily, but could not refrain from saying: "He'll not be so pleased with it, Bexon."

Bexon swung round on him sharply. "How do you know? Been reading it?"

"Oh, crowds of the fellows saw it before I did. There it was, staring us in the face, you know. Not half a backhander, either."

"I don't know what you're getting at, Paddock, and I shan't read the postcard to see. Whatever any-

body else does, keep *your* long nose out of other people's business, or you'll be getting it trapped in a door."

Thus turning the laugh against Paddock for a change, Bexon ran all the way to King's and up the stairs to Gwynn's study. "A postcard for you, old man—left in Schoolhouse by mistake," he explained his abrupt entry by saying.

There was a cordial ring about the "old man" which brought a flush of pleasure to Gwynn's bronzed face. However strained matters might be in King's, the head prefect of Schoolhouse was not jealous of him, evidently.

"Don't go, Bexon," the captain pleaded. "I see at a glance what this postcard means. It's as much your affair as mine. St. Placid's won't give us a match."

"They won't? Botheration to 'em!"

"Here, read what their captain says." It was gratifying to Bexon that Gwynn did not think he had already seen the reply. "Rather terse, isn't he?"

"Terse isn't the word," Bexon answered, after taking the refusal in. "Snorty, I call it. Lord Tom Noddy standoffishness. Swelled-headed beggar!"

"I'm not altogether surprised, Bexon, old fellow." Gwynn said the "old fellow" shyly, because it was the first time they had had a quiet chat together. "Theirs is the oldest school up here; ours is a glaring new one."

"What's that matter?"

"It counts for rather a lot, I fancy."

"Mouldy age is nothing to boast about."

"St. Placid's men are proud of it, though."

"What, proud because their benches and desks are

all wormeaten ? Give me a clean new table to sit at and a spring mattress to sleep on, and they may take their stuffy featherbeds, say I ! "

" That's right enough, Bexon, but we can't puff such pride away. It's been there too long ! Putting myself in Marchmont's place, I think I can see his viewpoint. We're only a scratch lot——"

" Not such duffers as the stiff-necked bounders imagine, perhaps."

" No, but we've only played house matches as yet, and games with other schools are going to be harder to fix up than I thought. Ringing Ravine's list is full —they'll take us on next season, they say. Weaponess College haven't replied, though I've written their captain twice, and the dates Ramsdale have given us are both in February."

" Then we haven't arranged a single match this term ? "

" Not so far."

" Whew ! "

" Yes, it's a corker. The Ashes will say—your Schoolhouse men in particular—that we might just as well have had Rugger if the Soccer clubs won't condescend to play us."

" We're not *all* Ruggerites in Schoolhouse, old man."

" No : the practice games have shown that your goalkeeping, for example——"

" Oh, that was merely a fluke. Learnt to catch a ball fairly well at Rugger, you know."

" You've a safe pair of hands, thank goodness. You'll be my choice for goal, anyhow."

" Thanks, old man. I'll do my best."

" Possibly your first chance will be against St. Placid's, after all."

"But they've declined!"

"I'm going to see their captain about that."

"You never are, Gwynn—not really!"

"Yes, I am."

"When?"

"Now."

Bexon looked shocked and reproachful. "Oh, no, Gwynn!" he protested. "Be persuaded; don't go."

"Why not?"

"Oh, you must know! It—it's like eating dirt, don't you think? Making doormats of ourselves at the very start."

"*Infra dig.?* Well, some may think so——"

"We all shall, I'm afraid."

"Can't help it if you do, Bexon. I feel myself sort of responsible for the Soccer Club. I promised 'em games, you know (cocksure fool that I was), and games they must have somehow."

"But not through kow-towing to a conceited ass like this Marchmont fellow, old man. He'll only insult you afresh."

"If he does that to my face, Bexon, he'll be showing himself up more than me."

"Nay, nay, Gwynn—this is too stupid of you. Keep away. Cut it out! Honestly, it's a rotten plan. I'd chew tin-tacks before I'd do it. One captain begging of another—oh, hang it all, you mustn't, really!"

"Well, Bexon, I didn't ask to be captain, did I? The job was poked at me, so to speak, before I'd found my feet. You'll all have to tick me off if I don't get things right, but I must do them my own way or not at all. You'd do that yourself in my shoes, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, rather, but still——"

"Don't worry about it, old man! St. Placid's won't fall on me and crush me for my cheek."

He donned his captain's cap—brightly new in its blue-and-gold harlequin squares — and carefully brushed some dust from his shoes into the fireplace.

"I must get a smarter fag," he laughingly remarked. "Blenkin minor isn't particular which polish he uses —black or brown. Two-colour shoes will look rather bad form through St. Placid's spectacles, I'm afraid!"

Then this odd school captain, seemingly without a grain of genuine pride in his system, set off cheerfully to beard the lion of St. Placid's in his den, and thought so little of the task he had set himself that he whistled a gay tune as he went!

CHAPTER V

WILF'S WAY OF DOING THINGS

"Bring me to the test,
And I the matter will re-word."
SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet.*

BRUCE MARCHMONT had had a heavy afternoon.

There had been three trial games taking place simultaneously, and he never spared himself on such occasions. From one field to another he darted ceaselessly, with open eyes and mind for budding talent, resolved only on giving full encouragement without fear or favour, and absolutely self-reliant in his opinions and judgment.

There were no such hampering institutions as "consultation committees" at St. Placid's, and never had been. Its captain held supreme sway over games: his word was law.

Satisfied that the reservoir of "coming men" was ample enough to fill the places of the heroes who had departed, he returned to the school, tired but happy, with a sheaf of mental observations to transfer to his notebook. Some of these slipped from his mind in the surprise he felt at encountering a stranger within the gates—a smiling boy in the harlequin cap of Ashwinnin School, whose intention to waylay and address him was uncomfortably obvious.

It had been tacitly understood, from the day when the foundation-stone of the new school was laid by Sir

Oswald Dyde's daughter, that St. Placid's were to have "no truck with" Ashwinnin. Already they had dubbed it "The Oddity School," believing that its higgledy-piggledy assortment of boys, drawn by advertisement from all points of the compass, could only be a collection of juvenile freaks—scamps and truants from other schools, long-haired sappers and mothers' darlings from dames' academies. Boys who entered the hallowed precincts of St. Placid's were destined to do so from birth, and they were swiftly removed from it, however exalted their parentage might be, if they did not make good and sufficient progress both in and out of school.

With such thoughts to influence him, Bruce Marchmont would gladly have seized the flimsiest excuse for passing the intruder by. No such chance came to his aid: Wilfred Gwynn stood right in his path and spoke to him.

"You are captain of St. Placid's, I think?" Wilfred politely began.

"Yes. You want me?"

"I do, please, if you can spare a few minutes."

"I'm rather pressed for time."

"Then I'll be as quick as I can. I'm the captain of Ashwinnin."

"Yes?"

Marchmont's patiently bored monosyllable was not flattering. He may have meant nothing by it, but it conveyed to the other boy's mind the inference that the captain of St. Placid's thought Ashwinnin had made a poor choice. Without minding that the visitor smilingly continued:

"You told me, on a postcard, that you couldn't give us a couple of footer matches this season."

"I didn't say 'this season,'" was Marchmont's stiff correction.

"Oh, well, I hope you don't mean to rule us out for ever! That's what I came to see you about. We're neighbouring schools——"

"Only in—er—a geographical sense."

"In quite a decent ordinary sense, I trust. Come, Marchmont, is it a sound plan to start boycotting us before we've ever had a chance to show our class? What is it going to lead to, do you think?"

"Lead to?"

"Yes; can't you see that it's likely to stir up a lot of bad blood?"

"Really, I don't follow you," Marchmont stiffly said. "I see no special reason why we should mingle blood at all."

He looked constrainedly to right and left of him as he spoke, aware that many quizzing eyes were now on him and the Ashwinnin captain. Yet he could not, without absolute rudeness, break off the parley. The only escape from an embarrassing position was to invite his visitor to step indoors, and this, very reluctantly, he did.

He had an oak-beamed study on the second floor, beautifully furnished by St. Placid's for the material comfort of its successive captains. His own taste evidently ran to rare ferns and ornamental plants; there were several specimens of both in pots and window-boxes, and their loveliness served to heighten the old-world charm of the room.

"Say, this is great!" Wilfred cried, in spontaneous admiration.

"Glad you like the room," was the studiously correct answer.

"Oh, of course, the room—that's all right. But I was meaning the ferns and flowers really. I fancy those with the yellow middles, smelling of meadow-sweet—what do you call 'em?"

"Anemone-centred chrysanthemums."

"So they are! Splendid varieties, too. And what's that huge prickly thing with thick blue spikes?"

"A cactus."

"Oh, yes, I know—one of those plants which bloom about once in a hundred years! Really, I'm keen on this sort of thing, Marchmont. Tell me the names of your ferns, do."

"But you came to see me about——"

"Footer—oh, yes. That will keep! I've a port-folio of pressed fern-leaves at home, but you've got ferns here which I've never seen before—gems! How in the world did you find 'em?"

There was no doubting the genuine enthusiasm of Wilfred Gwynn's interest. His eyes shone with fervent appreciation of the fine ferns, and that common bond of sympathy which draws together two lovers of the same fascinating hobby weakened Bruce Marchmont's reserve. His austere manner was only a shield, after all; he dropped it now and became a perfectly natural and normal boy in his eagerness to describe his treasured collection of living ferns, in quest of which, as he shortly explained, he had spent lonely holidays amid the wildest mountain scenery.

Wilfred praised some, criticised others, and asked intelligent questions about all. Soon they were chatting as freely as if they had been chums for years—Bruce being, if anything, the more talkative of the two.

"There isn't, I must confess, a fellow in all St.

Placid's who shows as much knowledge of ferns as you do, Gwynn," he admitted at last. "Are you thinking of starting a collection yourself?"

"I should love to, Marchmont."

"Well, you'll find some pretty fair specimens in these parts. You won't know just where to look for them at first, but if—if you're knocking about on some free halfer soon, I—I—it'll be a pleasure to put you on the right track."

"That's ripping of you, Marchmont! I'd like nothing better."

"Right you are, then! I'll let you know when. Got space for a collection in your study?"

"Oh, rather! It's bigger than this."

"Why, yes—more modern; I'd forgotten that. Well, I was going to suggest—that is, if it wouldn't be too much of a fag to cart a couple of ferns back with you—well, take your choice of 'em and welcome!"

The magnificent generosity of the offer was amazingly overwhelming. It made Wilf guilty of staring at Bruce as if he thought him mentally unbalanced. Words were hard to string together, but at length he managed to declare that he could on no account accept such a lavish and unconditional gift.

"Oh, rot!" the captain of St. Placid's replied. "I'm no dog-in-the-manger collector. It's good to know I'm not the only one in Whisperdale. Some of the Saints think it a daft hobby, you know. If you won't choose two ferns yourself, I'll pick them for you. Here, catch hold of these!"

He would take no refusal. The pots in which the ferns were planted would have broken in the good-natured struggle if Wilfred had persisted in declining them. He finally accepted them with many profuse

thanks, being told to shut up and say no more about it. In his excitement he seemed quite to overlook the original purpose of his visit, but as they walked together to the gates Bruce actually had the decency to remind him of it.

"That postcard, you know—I was in no end of a sweat when I wrote it—had nothing handier. Burn it!"

"I will, like a shot, Marchmont. There's nothing on it I want to commit to memory, I assure you."

"I'm awfully sorry I sent it."

"I wasn't fretting about it, Marchmont, not a little bit."

"Putrid of me, all the same. I see, on second thoughts, what a bloomer it was. If I could wipe it off your mind in any way——"

"That's rather easily done, after all! Let me go back with a couple of dates in my pocket."

"The fellows will rave——"

"Yes, you'll have that to face, I suppose. We're such a red-raw new lot. Still, if we put up a good game——"

"You'll find us pretty hot stuff. Why not kick off against our second team? I can give you a couple of Saturday matches with them."

Wilfred shook his head uncompromisingly. "Won't do, Marchmont—sorry! The Ashes would say I'd humiliated them. Touchy lot of men, though so fresh! First team or none, I'm afraid."

"As you will, Gwynn." The captain of St. Placid's sighed deeply in conceding the point. "You'll get an awful pasting, you know, but that's *your* funeral. Next Wednesday, on your ground: how will that suit?"

"Fine! I say, Marchmont, you're an awfully good fellow all round. You can't imagine what a feather this will be in my cap. I'm the freshest of fresh captains, and if you'd turned me down again over these footer fixtures——"

"I understand! Take care you put up the dickens of a fight next Wednesday, or the trouble will be at my end."

Then the captain of the old school and the captain of the new, whom everybody had expected to be at daggers drawn from the start, parted on such good terms that each, in his heart, looked forward eagerly to the day on which they could meet again.

CHAPTER VI

THE JUNIOR FIVE-A-SIDE MATCH

"*Allons!* through struggles and wars,
The goal that was named cannot be countermanded."

WALT WHITMAN.

BLENKIN MINOR, while feeling it an honour to fag for the captain of Ashwinnin, had no reason to be overawed by his position.

Gwynn neither hectored him nor patronised him. Of fault-finding there was plenty at first, the fag's happy-go-lucky methods giving full scope for it; but the captain's smilingly tactful words sounded more like compliments than corrections.

Senior Ashes shrugged their shoulders as they watched his methods. "It won't pay, Gwynn," Walworth said. "A sharp kicking is the right kind of physic for slovenly fags. Butter only fattens 'em."

"True," Blenkin major agreed. "Boot him, Wilf. That'll spruce him up."

"Your own minor, Blenk!" Wilf laughed.

"It's the kindest sort of brotherly love. I warn you, Wilf, Morice will get out of hand if you don't hold him on a tight rein. To show you what swollen cheek he's got, he applied for the assistant librarianship in my name, and got it!"

"But you took the job on yourself, Blenk."

"Had to, Wilf, to save the little monkey's face. What made it so funny was that Cyclo Wiske put in

for it too, and would have got it but for my minor's brazen application."

"Cyclo shoved in yards of swank about love of books, lifelong devotion to literature, and so forth," Walworth chuckled, "and young Blenk's half-sheet of notepaper knocked his end in."

"I'd have 'fessed the truth and let Cyclo have the post (never having dreamed of it myself) if he hadn't turned up so nasty about it. Said I'd be no more good at it than a colporteur in Gipsy Meadow, didn't he, Wally? We looked the word up and found it meant a hawker of books in a travelling caravan."

"That decided it," Walworth said. "Blenk vowed he'd sit there all night to keep Cyclo on the other side of the library counter. Wiske's as wild as a puma about it."

"We're a queer lot of men," Wilf smiled. "I'm captain and don't want to be; you're a prefect without wishing it, Wally, and Blenk's in the school library by a sheer fluke! Poor old Cyclo wanted to be everything and gets nothing. It's an upside-down state of affairs."

"I hear St. Placid's are calling us the Oddity Boys," Wally observed, "and we really must seem a penny-plain and twopence-coloured pirate's crew to them. All sorts and sizes jumbled together, and half of us still *minus* school-caps."

"Some of us will be turning out in long trousers for the footer match if you don't keep a sharp watch, Wilf," Blenkin major said, with mimic concern.

Nicknames and abbreviations had become fairly general by now. The captain was "Wilf" to the seniors and "Old Gwynn" to the juniors; "Cyclo" stuck to Wiske like a burr, no matter how irritably he

tried to shake it off; "Blenk" tripped easier off the tongue than "Blenkin major," and "Wally" and "Bex" had a chummier ring than plain "Walworth" or "Bexon."

Paddock was appropriately shortened to "Dock," some saying he deserved to stand in one for his criminally vile jokes and puns; "Pit-pat" suited Patrick Leatham's short-stepping run from room to room on night-duty, and "Lantern" was a soubriquet naturally suggested by the shape of Guyes' jaws.

Some of the masters had escaped being nicknamed so far, but Mr. Balsam, the Classical Master, had become "Shrinker," from his habit of covering his ears and shuddering when anybody made a poor shot at a question.

Mr. Sheppey, the Maths master, was "Old Sheep," though he neither looked nor acted like one, being a very "live" man indeed.

Mr. Rosebank, the English master, was called "Wriggles" from his practice of twisting the upper part of his body, in paroxysms of silent laughter, over the books he read in class.

Dr. Vollum was sometimes referred to as the Old Man, sometimes as "Volley," a thing which the rapid fire of his ironical speeches occasionally suggested.

Only those masters and boys who lacked distinguishing characteristics were left without nicknames, and most of them would probably have welcomed an alias of some sort—even an uncomplimentary one—rather than be ignored as nonentities.

Blenkin minor had not been one of those who had read Marchmont's postcard to Gwynn, but he heard of it from several sources and burned to avenge the insult to his fagmaster's dignity.

It didn't in the least move him from his purpose to learn that a match with St. Placid's had been arranged, after all. He gathered round him a band of youngsters from the Third Form, gave them the title of "Skylarks" (the windows of Small School, be it noted, looked out on Skylark Lane) and fared forth in battle-array to challenge any stray party of Junior Saints who might be "rotting about" in the highways and byways of Whisperdale.

"Not good enough for 'em, aren't we?" he fiercely declaimed. "We'll show 'em!"

"Not fit to be touched with a long pole, aren't we?" shouted Appleton (called "Appy" for short). "We'll show 'em!"

"Not to be on the same earth as they are, what?" cried Master Silloth (who didn't in the least mind his name being contracted to "Silly"). "We'll show 'em!"

Nine other shrill-voiced Skylarks piped forth similar sentiments, all ending with "we'll show 'em," and the hunting instinct which guides avengers on the war-path took them to the very spot where thirteen young Saints were unluckily gathered together round a roaring fire of whins, which they had collected and ignited for the sheer joy of making a blaze.

Their backs were turned to the skirmishing force, and Blenkin minor was thus enabled to act with the prompt decision of a daring commander. He jumped at the fire and kicked away the tree-branches which supported it, shouting as he did so:

"*That* much for your measly old fire, you great, silly babies from St. Placid's! Stamp it out, men!"

His "men" showed Berserk glee in obeying his orders. Uttering joyous yells, they scattered the frail

whins in all directions, while the shocked and surprised Saints watched the onslaught open-mouthed. Then, coughing and blinking, the stoutest-hearted of them demanded a reason for the outrage.

"What harm's our fire done you new school bounders?" their wrathful spokesman asked.

"That's right, Chubby!"

"Make him apologise, Chubby!"

"Shove his cheeky head into the fire, Chubby, there's a lad!"

Chubby's cheeks, pink with heat and streaked with carbon, gave him anything but the appearance of a formidable foe. He seemed to prefer words to fists as weapons, and in such a contest he met more than his match in Blenkin minor. Cheered by their respective followers, they slanged each other for all they were worth, but the last word was with the Skylarks' leader.

"*We* know why you lit a fire, you stuck-up Saints," Blenkin minor positively declared. "To dry your rotting old school's mould off your clothes, that's all."

Here was sacrilege, to be sure! The venerable antiquity of St. Placid's, which they had rightly been taught to revere, treated now with as much contempt as if it were fungus in a pasture! Rotting with mould, was it? Well, the new school nobodies must be very smartly reminded of their inferiority. They should be shown that there was no sort of mould on the boys who lived and worked and played under the sheltering dome of St. Placid's. As a beginning, they should receive the chastening corrective of a sound drubbing!

"Sock 'em, men; whip 'em to a custard!" Chubby commanded, in language much more modern than the school that had the doubtful honour of teaching him English.

There were thirteen Saints to a dozen Skylarks, so that, at first, they gained a slight advantage in the scramble which took place amid the embers of the scattered fire. Chubby claimed a direct hit on Blenkin minor's nose, drawing a few drops of blood; but there was far more clinching and holding than actual fighting and the rival forces were so evenly matched that the wild enthusiasm for combat gradually waned.

After all, there wasn't really any great cause to fight for—not yet. Such a motive might develop later, when they knew each other better—or worse; but it was scarcely worth while to fight to the bitter end until you had something to be genuinely bitter about, and bear-like hugging becomes monotonous if obstinately persisted in.

"Oh, I say, this is rather a bore," Silloth was the first to complain.

"I think so, too," said a panting Saint.

"Shall we all agree, then, to break away for a bit?"

"Let's!" said several combatants, with significant readiness.

There was such remarkable unanimity about the matter that they all broke away as if pulled apart by strings.

"No horse-sense in cracking a fellow's ribs, is there?" Chubby gasped. "Can't we settle the scrap in some more sporting way?"

"I know how!" Blenkin minor cried.

"Tell us!"

"Lug that big bounceball out of your pocket, Appy, and we'll play 'em at footer. Then they'll see we *can* play."

The Skylarks seconded the proposal with acclamation, but the leader of the Saints demurred.

"This isn't a proper place for football," he objected. "Where are the goalposts?"

"That's an easy nut to crack," Blenkin minor declared. "We'll heap some of these broken stones up."

"Even then, we haven't many footer men with us. They're hockey and fives men chiefly."

"All serene: that's soon arranged, too. As they're fives men, we'll play a five-a-side match."

Chubby was baffled. He didn't feel up to footer, his efforts to throw Blenkin minor having "winded" him. But to refuse a match—he, the representative of a club famous in the annals of school football—would savour of funk, and give these malapert Ashwinnin Juniors an excuse for taunting him, and there ought, of course, to be no doubt of the St. Placid's men winning if they condescended to play. Class *will* tell!

"Right you are, then; pick your team," he grudgingly consented. "How long shall we play?"

"Fifteen minutes each way; there won't be time for more."

Blenkin minor chose Appleton, Silloth, Edgcomb and Popple major to help him, and himself played full-back in the extraordinary game which followed.

His methods were unique, and needed special rules to cope with them. There being no referee to say him nay, he overthrew opponents with reckless vigour and unblushing effrontery, and raised a storm of protest by beating down with his palms a shot which looked an almost certain goal.

"Penalty!" the Saints yelled.

"Rot! I was goalkeeping when I did that," he coolly claimed.

"But you can't be both back and goalie at once, you bounder," Chubby raved.

"Oh, yes, I can—in five-a-side games. Surely you knew that!"

"No, I didn't."

"Shows your ignorance. I'm full-back again now and taking a goal-kick. Look out for it, Appy!"

Appleton did look out, and took the ball so neatly in his stride that he swept past all opposition and scored the only goal of the match.

With the wealth of a goal to bank on, the Skylarks' captain gave his whole attention to booting and fisting the ball out of play, and so successful was he in bamboozling the exasperated Saints, who tried in vain to copy his singular breaches of the rules, that he drew upon himself the flattering attention of a man in a heavy overcoat, who had slipped through the furze bushes to watch the game.

"Well played, youngster!" The man's laughing words were muffled by the wraps he wore, as though he suffered from a throat complaint. "It's been most amusing. Here's a reward for you: turn it into toffee or something."

He pressed a shilling into the boy's hand, emphasising the gift by an approving pat on the shoulder. Then he strode briskly away, not seeming to hear the gasp of thanks which the astonished recipient of his bounty gave.

"I say, what a rummy cove!" Appleton commented. "How much has he tipped you, Blenkie? A bob? My eye!"

"It ought to be yours, Appy; you scored the goal."

"Rats! He never looked at me."

"Well, take half. You'll have to! Better still, we'll buy a packet of 'Whispers' and hand 'em round."

"Whispers" were sugar cigarettes—far sweeter than real ones—and the other Skylarks cordially commended their leader's generous decision. On the jealous Saints, however, its effect was different.

"Low man!" Chubby called him. "Takes money for playing football."

"Beastly pro," another scornful Saint protested.

Blenkie's eyes flashed afresh. "I'd fight you, Chubby—stand-up fight you," he declared, "if there was an umpire here to see fair play."

"To see *what?*" Chubby shrieked.

"Fair play, I said."

"And a nice daisy *you* are to talk about fair play—you that's broken every rule of footer that was ever made."

"You're mad because you've lost, Chubby."

"What's losing a putrid, back-alley sort of match like this matter? You wait till next Wednesday—your jerry-built team will get socks then."

"Jaw's cheap where asses are," was Blenkie's repartee.

"Ass yourself! You and your Oddity pals, all shapes and sizes—freaks from schools that gave you the dirty kick-out."

"Better than being mildewed in a fusty old cellar-hole."

"What fusty old cellar-hole?"

"St. Placid's, I mean."

"Pooh! You're a curiosity. You're a freak. You ought to be in a museum, you did."

"You *are*, old fossil!" Blenkie retorted, with crushing aptitude.

And having had the better of the exchanges all round, the vivacious leader of the Skylarks led his flock away before Chubby could recover from the last deadly thrust of the oral duel.

CHAPTER VII

TWO SCARED SKYLARKS

"There are a good many real miseries in life that we cannot help smiling at."

HOLMES: *The Poet at the Breakfast Table.*

"I've found a motto for you, Wilf. 'Suaviter in modo.' I'll paint it over your door if you like."

"Why, Blenk, what have I done to deserve it?"

"Picked a team that's pleased everybody, including Wiske. Master-stroke of diplomacy, old lad, making Cyclo centre-forward. He's already counting up the goals he's sure to score."

"I chose him for his speed, Blenk."

"Leg-speed or tongue-speed?"

"Don't be severe, old mustard-pot! Wiske earned his place in the trial games."

"At ball-chasing he's the goods. Can't shoot for little apples, though."

"You could say that of most of us, Blenk, unluckily. We don't find the target, somehow. To be sure, Bex keeps a fine goal——"

"He'll have something harder to stop to-morrow, old man. Marchmont plays centre for Placid's, I hear. He'll need some holding."

"You can't dishearten me, Blenk. They're a polished team, I know, and we're only in the rough. Still, we've got pluck."

"You have! You'd never have challenged 'em,

else. They'll cut you into slices the first half and chew you up at leisure in the—— Hello, here come your fag and mine," Blenk stopped his pessimistic prophecy to say. "To what do we owe the favour of this afternoon call, young Morice?"

"If you please, Charles, we want to see Gwynn, not you."

"Thanks for telling me off! Shall I leave you together, then?"

"Oh, no, Blenk—stay, do," Wilf laughingly protested. "It isn't frightfully private, is it, young 'un?"

"Oh, not really, Gwynn. We'd just like you to settle a knotty point for us, that's all. About footer, you know."

"I may *not* know, but I'll do my best. Anything about the Junior House match?"

"Yes, Gwynn—and no. It—it's about that in—in a way." Blenkin minor was showing nervousness, much to his brother's surprise. "You've picked me to play right full-back—thanks awfully for that——"

"On merits, youngster; not because you're my fag, remember."

"Well, the mischief is, Gwynn, I'm wondering if I'll be able to play now."

"What, crocked already?"

"No, Gwynn; quite fit, thanks. But I and Appy (who's picked for outside-right) have played in a five-a-side match."

"You don't say so!"

"Yes, we have, and taken money for winning it, too."

"Taken money?"

"At least I have, Gwynn—Appy wasn't given anything."

" I took half of it, anyhow," Appy loyally admitted. " So I'm a pro, too, if you are, Blenkie."

Wilf put his hand to his brow with a gesture of mock tragedy. " This becomes complicated," he said. " Are we to understand that you two men have been playing football for filthy lucre on a public-house green somewhere ? "

" Why, no, Gwynn ! Only on the old quarryside in Whisperdale. We Kings got up a scratch game with five of the Saints and beat 'em one—*nil.* Appy scored the goal, didn't you, Appleton ? "

Appy blushed modestly, but couldn't disclaim the glory.

" And then who should come up but a funny man in a huge overcoat, with yards and yards of muffler round his face, and he gave me a shilling for playing well—for helping to whack the Saints, I mean—and I kept it and spent it on ' Whispers.' "

" Dear me, that's serious," Gwynn observed, keeping a perfectly straight and grave face, despite Blenk's attempt to put him out of countenance by sundry sly winks. " About what age would this mysterious stranger be ? "

" Between thirty and fifty, I should think."

" Oh, quite that," Appy meekly added.

" Ah, that leaves you a margin of years to work on, anyhow, Gwynn," was Blenk's dry comment.

" Did you notice, young 'un, which way he went ? " Wilf asked solemnly next.

" Towards the railway, Gwynn."

" That explains it," Blenk could not help interjecting. " He would be the agent of some big League Club on the prowl. They're terrors for spotting talent."

" You're pulling my leg, Charles—don't, please,"

his brother pathetically requested. "It's rotten for me. Look at this. It's a magazine cutting—came in an unstamped envelope, didn't it, Appy? and we'd postage to pay on it, hadn't we, Appy? Such a beastly sell! It says the football authorities don't recognise five-a-side matches——"

"They're often beyond all recognition, no doubt," murmured Blenk.

"We're quite sure those 'lifty' young Saints sent it, Gwynn, but they can't have printed it themselves, can they? And I *did* take money for playing, although it was only a shilling."

"A shilling? Oh, that alters things," Wilf said, unbending his brows and smiling again. "If it had been a fiver, now, you *would* have been in the soup. What did the man say when he tipped you the bob?"

"What *did* he say, Appy? We could scarcely tell, his mouth was wrapped up so."

"Something about changing the money into toffee," Appy shyly explained.

"Then it was an out-and-out gift, not payment by results, Blenkin minor. Good luck! You're saved. You're not a 'pro'—that is, unless somebody writes up to the Football Association to demand an inquiry into your irregular conduct. But that would be a low-down trick, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, very, Gwynn! Even Chubby wouldn't think of doing that, I'm sure. So I can play as an amateur in Saturday's House match, after all."

"This time, certainly. But mind how you go in future; I won't be responsible for you if you get up any more of these risky unofficial games. Bear that in mind."

"I'll never, never do it again. Thanks, ever so much, Gwynn, really."

The two Juniors backed out of the study with tremulous sighs of relief, and could be heard scampering along the corridor in the joyousness of their hearts, like innocent men released from jail.

"You played the little gudgeons beautifully, Wilf," Blenk chuckled. "Quite a treat, I assure you, to see my saucy minor reduced to a common denominator, so to speak."

"He must have kicked jolly well, though, to win a bob from a perfect stranger," Wilf concluded. "One day, Blenk, that minor of yours will be captain of games here."

Blenk suppressed a smile. He liked hearing his brother's praises sung by so high an authority, but tried to disguise his fraternal feelings beneath a warning expression as he said :

"The young sweep has good points, Wilf, but needs sitting on now and again. Do your duty by him as a fagmaster, and blunt the edge of him while there's time. Having only one hand, I can't towel him hard enough myself !"

CHAPTER VIII

JUBILATION AND HUMILIATION

"You use of all your colours, red or gold,
Purple or black, so that they stand out bold."
JOSEPH LEFTWICH: *Colour.*

SHINING newness was to be the order of the day at the official opening of Ashwinnin's football season.

The Honourable Mrs. Dyde was to remove the blue-and-gold barrier which stretched its silken length across the gateway of the new pavilion; the Headmaster himself was to hoist the school's new flag to the top of the pavilion pole; the housemasters' wives were to dispense refreshments to distinguished visitors in the new tea-room, bright with blue and gold paint; and the football team were to turn out, for the first time, in spotlessly new blue-and-gold costumes.

These picturesque arrangements had been expeditiously made by housemasters and prefects in collaboration, some pounding the school typewriters against time to get out the invitations to the ceremony, others working like horses to put finishing touches to the seating accommodation, while a third section, artistically-minded, erected a temporary archway over the gates and emblazoned the school's English motto on it, using blue and gold lettering in rich profusion.

All this was whole-heartedly enthusiastic and vastly exciting, though here and there the voice of the croaker

was heard. Blenkin major, for instance, did not conceal his dislike of the parade.

"A risky business," he termed it, shaking his head. "What are you drumming up the whole neighbourhood to see? Paint and pomp and vanity everywhere, and not a goal to justify it, methinks."

"Miserable old killjoy," Wiske reproachfully called him. "Beautiful spirit to kick off in, I must say."

"Just what I was meaning, Cyclo: too beautiful a spirit. A quieter shade of joy would have been better; less paint off the field, and more powder on it, you know."

"Pooh! Nothing like putting a bright face on things at the start. *Your* heart may be in your boots, Blenk; mine isn't."

"Then it ought to be, Cyclo, if you really mean to score those goals you've promised us."

Competing with Blenk in this kind of cross-talk was admittedly hard, and Cyclo retired from the contest on the plausible pretext of dressing for the match. "I'll want a bit of shooting practice beforehand," he said.

"A lot, I should say," blandly retorted Blenk.

The opening ceremony was gracefully performed under a blue sky and a bright sun—"even Nature sports our colours, you see," Wilf laughingly remarked to Bruce Marchmont, who had the courage to stand beside him during the speechmaking, turning a blind eye to the somewhat supercilious behaviour of the St. Placid's men, who gave the impression of being there rather against their personal wishes. "Shocking bad taste, this," their attitude of aloofness seemed to convey, "but what can you expect from a red-brick and new-mortar school?"

The Ashwinnin boys cheered the founder's wife till

she blushed with rosy delight, and gave the doctor three times three when he smoothly unfurled the majestic flag, presented to the school by Sir Oswald Dyde's winsome old mother.

Hearts were full, too, as the music-master led the boys in the chorus of the rousing new school song—an entirely spontaneous and unrehearsed effect this—for many of them already felt a sincere attachment to Ashwinnin growing up within them, and were stoutly prepared to uphold its claims against all comers in future, even though it had no traditions and had all its history still to make.

"After all, it *will* be an old school some day," Walworth sagely observed, "and I'd rather be here now than then!"

The match started immediately afterwards, Sir Oswald Dyde vigorously kicking off.

Two hundred or more boys had come from St. Placid's to see the sport, firmly convinced that their experienced team would slaughter the weak side opposed to them. In that cocksure mood they were totally unprepared for the shock which Harry Wiske gave them in the very first minute.

The ball had not been touched half-a-dozen times before Cyclo fastened on it from a throw-in, did a dazzling dribble at top speed, corkscrewed his way into the penalty area, and capped a thrilling performance by putting a red-hot shot past the helpless goalkeeper into the corner of the net.

Pandemonium then! Who could have pictured a more magnificent start from an untried and half-despised team than this? Who but the most blatant optimist would have dared to suggest such a meteoric success?

It brought the people in the pavilion enclosure to their feet, clapping and cheering: it sent a wave of frenzied joy through Big School, and set Small School hiccoughing through prolonged and irrepressible jubilation.

All Wiske's preliminary braggadocio was forgiven him for that sensational opening goal; Ashwinnin was ready to swear an oath that it had found a centre-forward second to none of his age in the kingdom.

What a wipe in the eye for St. Placid's stuck-up captain, who thought he had only to come condescendingly to Ashwinnin to see and conquer!

It was truly a sore blow to the Saints. Overboard already had gone their cherished scheme of passing through the season without yielding a goal. They had never entertained the possibility of "Stonewall" Rankin, their fine goalkeeper, failing to stop anything that the new school's sharp-shooters could fire at him. Rankin himself had scorned such an idea, and for that very reason, perhaps, was the easier caught napping. He looked sick about it as he furiously booted the ball back to the centre-line: it is difficult for pride to conceal its abhorrence of the long-delayed but inevitable downfall!

"Shove another through, Cyclo—encore!" an enthusiast called to him when the din had died down.

But the satisfaction of having drawn first blood did not long remain an advantage to Ashwinnin. Possibly Wiske's brilliant *début* did them more harm than good. At any rate, they held the lead for ten minutes only, and were fortunate to last out as long as that. St. Placid's forwards were practically dead on the target all that time, bringing out the best qualities that were in Bexon, giving him shots to field that would have

knocked a less robust and daring custodian silly. Friend and foe alike cheered the fearless fashion in which he faced his troubles, but nothing human could survive so fierce a fusillade. He ran out to clear once too often, and was beaten by Marchmont in the race for the ball.

There must only have been a fraction of an inch in it, yet the captain of St. Placid's coolly turned his chance into a goal.

"Soft as pudding! Mild as milk!" Blenkin minor disgustedly observed.

He had said angrier things than this to the group of Junior Saints near him, but it was the first remark audible to them after they had finished cheering the equaliser. Now they cast pitying glances at him.

"Milky yourself!" retorted Chubby. "If you want beefier ones they'll come along presently. There, didn't I tell you? That's a grilled steak for you, frizzling hot from the fire. He's dropped it—it's through—hurrah!"

Yes, goal number two was an accomplished fact, with Bexon shaking his hand and gingerly feeling his wrist as he stooped to reclaim the ball he could not hold. Thereafter all his vigilance, supported by the desperate agility of Gwynn, who repeatedly fell back between the sticks to head out dropping shots, could not prevail against the storming persistence of the attack.

Outclassed, flurried, and always in one another's way, the Ashwinnin half-backs helped on the bombardment by wildly kicking the ball back—as if Bex and Wilf hadn't enough to do already!—and in that fashion giving the visiting forwards better passes than their own halves could send along. Thrice did such

fool-headed methods give St. Placid's a goal, so that, with ten minutes of the first half to go, the crestfallen home team were four goals to the bad.

Excuses for such manifest inferiority would not hold water. "It's Bex and Wilf against the whole boiling of them," Walworth said. "All the rest of our team are gallery-men, looking on."

"I was right about it," Blenk answered, "but I'm sorry all the same. It's worse than I feared; they're making hacks of us."

"Still, we've got to have a learning," Walworth philosophically remarked, "and we won't despair. In some ways it's not so bad."

The comment was overheard by a satisfied and smiling Senior Saint, who had once or twice caused Blenk to wince by clumsily jostling his crippled arm. This aggressive youth sniggered at Wally's attempt to gloss things over.

"You don't call yours a not-so-bad team, do you?" he inquired. "You hadn't half a nerve to challenge us!"

"We wanted to see the one and only way to play class football," Wally replied, with misleading meekness of mien. "That's why we begged you to come."

Delicate satire of this kind was like pelting an elephant with comfits. The St. Placid's man, whom his nudging friends encouraged by whispers of "Go it, Hotpot," relied on heavier verbal weapons.

"It's a disgrace to be here at all," he said, "wasting our time playing duds at footer. You might just manage to draw a game with our third team—if you brought your own referee—but that's about your limit."

"Oh, dear, why didn't my parents enter me for St. Placid's?" Blenk sighed. "It's a great school."

"It is, too," Hotpot declared. "Yours is a kid's rabbit-hutch beside it."

"Metaphorically speaking, of course," Blenk purred. He was surrounded by Ashes now; they could tell something was coming, and hung expectantly on his words. "Even your school physician is a famous specialist, I understand. Operated on the crowned heads of Europe, hasn't he?"

"They say so, but that's got nothing to do with you, Archibald, or whatever your name is."

"Not with me, but with you," Blenk serenely retorted. "I was going to suggest you should also have your head opened and looked at, just to show where you keep your mind, you know."

It was a superbly reckless thrust, and Hotpot turned red with anger as some of the Ashes (and not a few of the Saints) sniggered at it.

"Look here, you, I didn't come to your rotten ground to be insulted," he fumed. "If you're seeking a rough house——"

"No, no, my friend, I don't want to hurt you," Blenk blandly protested. "You see"—holding out his stump of a hand—"there's a bit of a hook there. I might tear your face if we fought, and a face like that must have taken quite a lot of living down as it is."

Then, with the calm finality of a barrister who has trampled his opponent's case out of shape, he turned to his companions, saying brightly:

"Shall we shake a leg, you fellows?"

The laughing little group of Ashes, glad of a little comic relief from the football tragedy on the field, clustered round their jester and hurried him out of reach of Hotpot's wrath.

"You're too bad, Blenk, really," Wally grinned; but he squeezed his chum's sound arm admiringly, nevertheless.

During this snappy bit of by-play the Ashwinnin forwards had raised the drooping spirits of their supporters by setting off to the other end of the field. For five minutes they tried hard to put a better face on things, but their shooting, to quote Blenkin minor's opinion, was "all things vile."

Again and again they had the surprised defence in a tangle, but either blazed away too rashly at an open goal—Wiske being the chief offender in this regard—or touched the ball as charily as if it had been fashioned of Dresden china. Between these two extremes none of the quintette could find the happy medium, and it remained for Bruce Marchmont to show up the futility of their methods by breaking away and forcing a corner, which he calmly converted into a sixth goal himself.

Blenkin minor carried a face of doom into the refreshment-room at half-time, and scalded his tongue in his needless haste to swallow a cup of cocoa. His Lower Fourth chums were equally downcast, and in no mood to grin and bear silently the gibes of St. Placid's cockahoop spectators.

"You Saints make me tired," Blenkie said. He remembered as he spoke to scrape out with a spoon the sugary deposit at the bottom of his cocoa-cup. "You're so top-lofty."

"Reason to be," Chubby replied, through a mouthful of ginger biscuit. "Who *asked* for a hiding? Your captain did. Who's getting it? *He* is—they all are."

The juvenile Saints, clearing their throats of food, loudly cheered this incontrovertible statement of fact.

"Oh, shr-r-rup!" Blenkie cried, stopping his ears. "You're worse than a wagon-load of tom-cats, you are. If you don't believe me, ask your friends."

"Young Blenkin's jealous," Chubby taunted him. "Lost his appetite. Can't eat his bun."

It was true that Blenkie, in the distracted state of his mind, had forgotten to bite the currant-bun which he had mechanically ordered. He grabbed it now, and all on the spur of the moment pushed three-fourths of its bulk into Silloth's second cup of cocoa, just drawn, steaming hot, from the urn. Silly exclaimed loudly against the outrage, but his indignation swiftly changed to riotous amusement as he saw Chubby's white collar and scarlet tie turned to a mottled chocolate colour by the scattered fragments of the cocoa-soaked bun.

"Goal!" he delightedly chortled. "Well shot, Blenkie!"

"Naughty, naughty!" the waitress behind the counter thought it her duty to cry.

It *was* naughty, but there is never any telling to what limits of exasperation a football team's failure will drive its rabid supporters. Standing aghast, Blenkie at once regretted what he had done.

"Sorry, Chubby, old man," he said, fully meaning it; but Chubby fell upon him in the rage of a wounded vanity which no apology could appease, and there came an ominous crash of crockery and glass as the Ashwinnin's boy's elbows were driven back against the counter by the impetus of his rival's attack.

"Oh-h!" shrieked Susan, the housemaid waitress. "Three cups and a saucer smashed—yes, and a glass too! Stop it, you bad little boys!"

Stung by remorse, Blenkie actually allowed himself to be struck on the face without retaliation as he tried to explain that he knew he'd done a dirty trick. But Susan's screams and the juniors' shouts drowned his voice, and it was just at this noisy stage of the proceedings that the two captains entered together.

Instantly the scuffle ended. The wrestlers drew sheepishly away from each other, and Susan shrilled out a graphic account of their "shockin'" behaviour. Gwynn heard her patiently, inquired the damage, and then turned on his trembling fag.

"How much money have you got, Blenkin minor?"

"Eighteen pence, Gwynn."

"Out with it—you can owe me the balance. I see I must break in my new cane to-night. Come to me before supper."

"Ditto you to me, Ward-Mason," Marchmont austerely told Chubby. "You may not care to act like a hooligan in other people's rooms again."

Chubby shivered apprehensively, knowing the weight of Marchmont's arm, and his penetrating voice rang no more in the spectators' ears that day, even when his team scored a seventh, eighth and ninth goal.

Blenkie, too, watched in sad and pensive silence the ignominious rout of the Ashes. It was like a clotted nightmare to him. He saw Wiske make one more vainglorious and futile effort to repeat his sensational first-half performance and then relapse into breathless impotence, lolling about for the remainder of the game in a "let-somebody-else-do-it" attitude; he saw Strode, Gwynn's partner at full back, drifting aimlessly about in the penalty area (when Strode did occasionally touch the ball the act seemed to rob him of reason—he never quite knew what to do with it).

He saw, out of the tail of his eye, a gradual emptying of the seats in the pavilion enclosure as party after party of the school's guests walked away from the one-sided game, and he listened in bitter humiliation to the scathing criticisms—not from one side alone—of his captain's audacity in seeking matches with a school so far above his own in sporting capacity. Alas, poor Blenkie!

It was a day of deep and dark disgrace, relieved only by the splendour of Bexon's goalkeeping—a crumb of comfort for Schoolhouse—and the acrobatic skill of Gwynn at left full-back. These two lonely heroes of Ashwinnin set themselves the herculean task of preventing St. Placid's from running the score into double figures, and in some inscrutable way, with nearly all the visiting team on top of them, they achieved their purpose. The tenth goal would not come, and the score still stood at 9—1 when the whistle blew for time.

"Never mind, Gwynn," said the kindly referee, patting his back. "You did finely against hopeless odds. It wasn't his or Bexon's fault they lost, was it, Marchmont?"

"Oh, no, sir—nobody's fault at all," the captain of St. Placid's chivalrously responded. "Nobody's fault but mine, that is," he muttered to himself, taking long, fierce strides to the dressing-room in advance of everyone. "I did Gwynn no kindness and myself some harm by letting him coax this match out of me!"

CHAPTER IX

STRODE TESTS THE CAPTAIN'S RESOLUTION

" If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly."

SHAKESPEARE : *Macbeth.*

EXTRACT from the *Shires' Morning Mercury*, under the heading of " School Football " :

" The new boys' school at Ashwinnin opened its football season with a great flourish of trumpets the other day. Its munificent founder—Sir Oswald Dyde, Bart.—kicked off amid great enthusiasm, and the joy of the home team knew no bounds when H. Wiske, its fleet-footed centre-forward, scored delightfully in the first minute of the game. Afterwards, however, Ashwinnin suffered sadly for its boldness in challenging such a splendid team of young athletes as St. Placid's proved themselves to be. The home defence was all at sea throughout, and the score of 9—1, crushing though it was, might easily have been doubled had the visiting forwards exerted themselves to the full. Marchmont, their stylish centre-forward, cleverly shot four of the goals."

It was Blenkin major, in the reading-room, who first discovered this unflattering report. He thought it of such general interest that he snipped it out and mounted it on cardboard—then pinned it to the Hall notice board under the heading of " Games." There

it was seen by everybody, and few who read it could repress expressions of disgust.

"First the whipping, then the dry-rubbing," Wally commented. "Say as you will, these Placids are not true gentlemen. They shouldn't have jumped on us when we were down."

"Goodness knows, Wally, we deserved it," Strode moaned.

"*You* did, old man—like watching an old hen with sore feet, seeing you—but who on the field played better football than Wilf and Bex? Yet this lifty St. Placid's scribbler sticks his little finger up and ignores them."

"He mentions Wiske's goal," Leatham pointed out.

"Oh, yes, my dear Pit-pat—fireworks are always mentioned in the gala programme, you know. But Cyclo, saving his presence (I see him coyly concealing himself behind the hatstand) pricked his own balloon when he shot that goal. Felt like a dying duck in a thunderstorm after it—didn't you, Handsome Harry?"

Wiske emerged, quite shamelessly, from his hiding-place, and made a good-humoured feint at Wally's head. "I've often said I'd punch it, Wally, and I will, too, some of these times," he declared. "I don't for the life of me see why my goal shouldn't be mentioned——"

"Naturally!"

"Honour to whom honour is due, Wally. I handed those Placids a jolt in the first minute; you can't deny that stunned 'em."

"True, little man; you looked ever so pretty in your nice new clothes just then. The colour came out in the wash a bit later, though, didn't it?"

"Yes, he looked rather a wash-out before half-time," Blenk added.

"Oh, fish to all that!" serenely replied Cyclo. "You run me down and crack Gwynn up, but you know all the time that we owe this terrible showing-up to him."

"What nonsense! He and Bex kept the score from being twenty or more."

"I grant you that. They're topping defenders——"

"Kind of you to admit it."

"But who went fawning to St. Placid's, cap in hand, to whine for a match after we'd been told we couldn't have one? It wasn't you or I. Nor was it Blenk. It was Gwynn."

"Well, where's the crime?"

"Recall his speech at the meeting, my good fellow. Remember how he promised us a bagful of Soccer dates. See how every school but Ramsdale has turned us down! Think how many more will want to play us when they've seen the report of our fearful slugging!" He crooked his thumb and forefinger to form a cipher. "That many."

Blenk and Wally tried to riddle his theory with sharp sarcasm, but Cyclo's points had been well made—the majority of the Ashes evidently shared his views. Schoolhouse men were strongly with him.

"Wiske's right there," Strode said. "If we'd had Rugger instead of Soccer, you wouldn't have seen me making such an ass of myself at full-back."

It was useless for the captain's champion to repeat the argument that Rugger-playing schools were off Ashwinnin's road-map. Logic makes little impression on disappointed men. Gwynn had "mugged" them with his Soccer stunt, they snorted; he had dropped

them into St. Placid's jaws like live rabbits into a serpent's den ; but for his rotten sucking-up to Marchmont, there'd have been no farcical match and no horse-laughs from every other school in the county.

" He knew jolly well he couldn't play Rugger and wanted to shine at his own particular game," Strode permitted his jealous tongue to say.

Strode would not have spoken thus in the presence of Schoolhouse's head prefect ; Bexon was elsewhere at the time—an unfortunate circumstance, because Bex was an unwavering loyalist, who would have fiercely opposed such sentiments, and perhaps scotched the treason at its birth.

As it was, Strode's dissatisfaction spread rapidly through Schoolhouse, infecting also that section of King's which took Lantern Guyes for its leading light.

" Gwynn's a guesswork captain, that's all," Lantern told his clique. " He'll never stay the course. At Christmas he'll be scratched, if not sooner."

" Scratched ? " asked Pennin, looking puzzled.

" Yes, Simple Simon, scratched. In racing language, struck off the list. Wiske is the right horse to put our money on. He's a ' live ' man, Wiske is."

" Can he swim ? " was Pennin's apparently irrelevant question.

" Swim, you billy ? What's it matter if he can't ? Oh, I remember now ; you're the young whale that swam too far out among the jelly-fishes and got stung, aren't you ? So they sent you here, away from the rolling sea. Wonder he kept afloat, wasn't it, you men, with such a mouth for shipping water ? "

The less said about mouths the better where Lantern was concerned, one would have thought ; but there's none so blind to his own deficiencies as your candid

critic. It was easy to poke fun at the queerest-looking boy in a school of odds and ends, and Pennin, with a head which had been likened to a diver's helmet, offered a plain target for verbal arrows.

"I think a captain should be able to do everything," Pennin solemnly persisted, "and I've never seen Wiske in the swimming-bath."

"Nor have you seen him on the roof, repairing the lightning-conductor," Lantern scoffed. "You go and dive for oysters in the canal, Penny, and I'll give you a slate-pencil for every pearl you find."

Pennin was not offended. He was a youth with one absorbing passion—the water—and he clung to Lantern's set solely because it contained Dodsworth major and McColl, who had brought bright medals from other schools for proficiency in swimming. These two boys had noted Pennin's clumsy but powerful style in the baths, and were taking an interest in him. They looked upon him as their closest rival for championship honours at Ashwinnin, and feared he might beat them if they did not imitate his enthusiasm for practice.

While Pennin envied them their medals, they in their turn were slavish admirers of Wiske's and Lantern's scholastic abilities. Wiske was a shark at Latin hexameters and Greek iambics, and Lantern could play skittles with geometrical and natural science problems which tied Dodsworth major and McColl into every kind of mental knot. The two cleverest boys would occasionally condescend to unravel their difficulties for them, thus cheaply earning the hero-worship which a dull scholar is usually ready to lavish on a keener intellect than his own.

Other members of Lantern's gang owed similar

favours to him and Wiske, so that Cyclo was assured of a strong following of Kings, willing at all times to stand in the wings, so to speak, and keep the limelight playing on him in his self-appointed *rôle* of Ashwinnin's future captain.

He didn't go the length of signing their autograph albums or presenting them with postcard photographs of himself, but he had other ways of winning their regard. The only free supper of the term had been in his study, and the fare he provided was so abundant that what is known to rustics as "a second sitting-down" was necessary to empty the hamper. If the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, how much more could the same be said of a growing schoolboy, whose motto might excusably be "eat, drink and be merry" without the tragic addition of "to-morrow we die."

Gwynn gave no supper parties and asked no one to tea. "Stingy as a miser," was Lantern's comment on his lack of hospitality; "crabby as a hermit" was Strode's stricture on his unsociable habits.

His custom of setting out for solitary walks, without giving a fellow the chance to say "Going anywhere partic, Gwynn?" was adversely commented on; surely a captain could afford to be a little chummier than that, they said to one another.

Nobody believed that shortage of money was the root cause of the captain's reserve. "He brasses up for everything that's started, even for the nippers' foreign stamp society," Dodsworth major reported.

"Yes," said McColl, "the Skylarks have made him President of their paper-dart club; there's a notice to that effect on the board."

"All he's afraid of is showing his ignorance,"

Lantern summed it up by saying. "Shouldn't marvel to see him spooning up peas or drinking hot tea out of a saucer."

That was merely vulgar nonsense—Lantern being by no means a paragon of table manners himself—but it formed part of a scheme to belittle Gwynn and shorten his reign as captain, and it was not possible that Wilf could be deaf and blind to it all, despite his preference for his own society in spare moments. Some said he was too much up to the ears in sapping for the Founder's English History Prize to see anything a foot before his nose, and he certainly burrowed like a mole into Froude, Green, and Macaulay; but an incident was shortly to happen which showed that he was not quite so "bog-eyed" with study as his rivals imagined him to be.

It occurred on Saturday afternoon, when, in the absence of a football fixture, there was nothing better on the cards than a kick-about practice.

For this sort of thing the lowest patch of ground, with its unnetted goalposts, was considered good enough. When Wilf and his King's men turned up there, however, they were surprised to see a bunch of fellows wrestling laughingly for possession of a Rugger ball, which one of them at last secured and grounded over the line.

"Try—hooray!" cried Strode. "Bring her out, Castle—I'll convert her."

Knowing that Wilf was darkly watching them, Strode went through the pantomime of placing the ball over an imaginary Rugger cross-bar—then clapped his hands clownishly, shouting "Goal!"

"That's enough," Wilf abruptly said. "Clear that Rugger ball off the ground. We're going to practise."

"Practise what?"

"Soccer."

"Yes, but for what after that? Not a real out-and-out match with eleven other fellows from a distance, I suppose?"

"Chuck your fooling, Strode. Nobody stands more in need of Soccer practice than you."

"Pot Soccer! We've sawn it off, Gwynn. Rugger's our tipple from now on. Set her going again, boys—hoop-la!"

The Schoolhouse crowd, looking rather self-conscious under Wilf's disapproving eye, formed a loose pack and recommenced play. Here and there a King's man, keeping his head well down, pushed into the scrum, making the thing look ominously like an organised rebellion against the captain's authority. Wilf flushed to the temples with vexation.

"Stop it, I tell you," he commenced. "We want that goal for Soccer."

"There's a goal at the other end," Strode snapped out. "Go to that!"

The Soccerites were outnumbered two to one, and the eviction of the Rugger gang by main force was clearly impracticable. Of what use were words of command when there was no obvious inclination to obey them? Wilf felt the paralysis of inaction stealing over him, and was wondering if he could, with dignity, turn back to consult a housemaster when somebody blindly kicked the ball out of the scrum, and it came in his direction.

He made a dart for it without a moment's hesitation. It struck a tuft of grass and bounced awkwardly, well wide of his hands, but he took a speculative leap sideways and snatched the leather at the second attempt,

very much as if he had been accustomed for years to the vagaries of an oval ball.

"Steady with our ball there," Strode warned him.

Wilf's coolly silent retort was to take a deliberate turn towards the hedge—then, with the wind behind him, to drop-kick the ball as far as it would go. It accommodated itself to his mood by ricocheting over the hedge, and a faintly musical splash told the astonished Ruggerites that it had fallen into the waters of the canal.

"You rotten egg!" Strode inelegantly cried. "What a daft thing to do! How the dickens do you think we're going to get the ball back?"

Wilf peeled off his sweater in readiness for play before troubling to reply. Then he said, with a hand on each hip:

"There are two ways of fishing it out, Strode. You can either swim for it—in which case you'll get wet—or trudge two miles to the nearest bridge and retrieve it from the far bank, where the wind's sure to have driven it."

Strode looked unutterable things. He was taller than Wilf—most of the Sixth Form fellows could claim to be that—and the captain had yet to prove that his fists were of any great value in a scrap; but there was an indefinable air about him now, despite the nervous pallor which showed itself beneath his bronzed cheek, which decided Strode that a fistic falling-out was unlikely to bring him glory, and might conceivably result in something very much the reverse.

He had seen (none nearer) the vigour of the football captain's kicking under severe pressure—what if Gwynn were able to use his hands to the same effect?

It wasn't a chance Strode felt justified in taking; there was too great an element of uncertainty about it—yet!

"Oh, well, it was only a mouldy old ball, anyhow," he said, trying to convey *blasé* contempt with a jerk of his head. "Run and get it, you nippers, and it's yours for keeps!"

"Not to be played with on practice days, though—remember that, whoever collars it," Wilf took care to say. "Line up for Soccer, men—attack *v.* defence."

The captain had prevailed. Nobody who saw him boot the trespassing ball out of the field and over the hedge and into the canal—a fine-length kick, even with the wind behind it—could doubt that, in a ticklish crisis, he was quick to make a decision and quick to act on it.

Strode and a dozen others shrugged themselves into their overcoats and left the ground; but no Kings followed them. For the time being, the Kings were secretly rather proud of their head boy, and the splash of the spurned oval in the water remained a musical memory in their minds for the rest of the day.

CHAPTER X

THE MEN OF MYSTERY

"When I did wake this morn from sleep,
It seemed I heard birds in a dream."
WM. H. DAVIES: *Early Morn.*

THE King's Junior Darts Club having secured, through Blenkin minor's agency, the use of the captain's name as president, came to the conclusion that it was no longer dignified to play with home-made darts.

"What we need is a thundering big, black dart-board, with the divisions marked off in gold," Blenkie ambitiously stated.

Silloth shook his head. "Gilt, you mean," he said. "Funds won't run to gold."

"White will do," suggested Attick, still more modestly.

"No," was Blenkie's firm fiat, "nothing third-rate. Either we do the thing in style, you Kings, or jack it up altogether."

"We were having good sport as it was, Blenkie," persisted Attick, the economist, "without all this fluence."

Blenkie turned, more in sorrow than in anger, to reason with him.

"Look here, Attick: if you were captain of this jolly big school, would you want to be president of a darts club which only threw pen-nibs into a chalked box-lid? Would you be seen standing to watch 'em

for half a minute? 'Mabs' in the gutter would be as good a game to see; peg-top fights would be smarter."

The irony of the Blenkin brothers was usually too much for those who crossed swords with them in argument. Attick gave in.

"All serene, Blenkin," he said. "Get a swell board if you're flush. I'm not."

"Neither am I. Owe Gwynn a bob for broken crockery yet. But we won't blow in our own money on a new board, old man. We'll buy it with other people's."

"Oh, very likely! Sure thing, I should say," Attick scoffed.

"One moment, Attick: take your time! What happens, I ask you, when some society or other runs right out of the 'ready'?"

"It busts up," Attick choicely suggested.

"No, old stick-in-the-mud. A bazaar happens, or a concert happens, or they raffle off somebody's gramophone—any old thing to raise the wind. We're going to do ditto, and that right speedily."

Thereupon Blenkie unfolded his plan, which had come to him, he said, in his sleep—well, perhaps not exactly in his sleep, but between sleeping and waking. The school theatre, set apart for the performance of old English drama, was to be borrowed for one night, and therein was to be given a class of entertainment never before attempted in a boys' school. "A Mystery performance," he added.

The announcement fell rather flat. "What, one of those plays where you wear long beards and pretend to be thousands of years old?" Appleton asked. "Honestly, Blenkie, that's no good. We should be treading on one another's whiskers half the time."

"Of you, Appy, I expected intelligence," his chum reproached him by saying. "You'll never win the darts championship with such one-eyed shots as that."

"Well, tell us what you're really driving at, Blenkie."

"In two shakes of a donkey's tail! A mystery performance means taking a ticket for a show you don't know what's to be about." His phrasing was bad, but his meaning was clear. "It might be a sing-song, it might be a fish-supper, it might be a confetti carnival; you never know you're luck till you're inside."

"So that's what you thought out in your sleep, is it?" Attick scornfully said. "Get some headache powders, Blenkie, and take one at night. Then dream again."

"Sneeze, Attick; your brains are dusty," was Blenkie's swift repartee. "Here's the greatest money-making stunt ever invented, and you're skitting at it. You other Kings *have* got wits, luckily. Isn't it plain to you what a gold-mine we've struck?"

After such a compliment to their superior acumen they felt bound to give enthusiastic support to their leader's scheme, whatever their doubts of its success may have been.

From that hour secret rehearsals began in grim earnest. Blenkin major was the only outsider to be confided in, and he chaffed them unmercifully at first, but ultimately placed his cosy little room in the library at their disposal during certain hours of the day; and there, in perfect seclusion, Blenkie showed endless patience and not a little skill in arranging and rehearsing the various "stunts" which were to hit the school between the eyes and leave it dazzled with wonderment.

The captain did his bit, as president, by amiably smoothing away obstacles to the theatre's use for such a purpose. He induced Old Maltkin to see the humorous side of it, or his ambitious fag's project would have been nipped in the bud.

"I hold you responsible for their good behaviour, Gwynn," was the housemaster's proviso; and, though that was rather a tall order, Wilf cheerfully gave the necessary guarantee.

Novel modes of advertising were employed to boom the show. Blenkie wanted to call it "Mysterious Monkey-shines," but deferred, for once in a way, to Attick's opinion by styling his company "The Mystery Men" instead.

The library copy-graph, which took colours beautifully, turned out a profusion of leaflets, and the cheek with which Blenkie appropriated nearly the whole of the notice board space under "Indoor Games" was laughingly tolerated.

One of his boldest dodges was to prepare, with the aid of his brother's rubber-type outfit, a slogan which ran: "You Mustn't Miss the Mystery Men next Monday," and this he imprinted on hundreds of gummed labels, which he and Appy stealthily stuck inside every desk-lid they could get at, and in many a lesson-book as well.

The trick was discovered by a master later, with grievous consequences to the author of it, but Blenkie's zeal allowed him to harbour no thought of future punishment. The club's performance was first and foremost in his mind, to the exclusion of all craven scruples.

Where ordinary attempts at amusement catering might have failed, the element of profound mystery

succeeded. Monday brought the school to its first merit holiday of the season, and the Ashes were in a festive mood.

"Let's all go and see the show," the seniors said, and the juniors, seeing their elders gaily rolling in, dropped their attitude of contemptuous aloofness from "the whole tinpot, sure-to-be-a-fizzle" thing, and searched their pockets feverishly for the odd coppers essential to admission.

"Full to the doors," was the jubilant boast which Blenkie made to the nervous performers behind the scenes; and, allowing for a little managerial exaggeration, it could truthfully be said that late-comers found difficulty in securing chairs.

The start was sensationally delightful. Unseen hands threw a shower of paper-wrapped caramels into that part of the theatre which seated the twopenny patrons, who were put into excellent humour by such an avalanche of largesse. Amid their rapturous cheering, the curtains parted on the first item of the mystery programme.

Yells of amusement greeted it. A huge boxer, padded to the size of Falstaff, faced a dancing little one (seen to be Booker minimus, the smallest of the Skylarks). They sparred comically for fifty-nine seconds, as indicated on a huge clock-face at the back of the stage, worked by invisible fingers from behind. Then Booker minimus struck his grotesque rival a smart blow. There was a flash and a loud report, and the boxing Falstaff's chest collapsed like a pricked balloon. His inflated calves burst at the same time, and he turned a slow but clever back somersault off the stage, leaving his diminutive opponent bowing like a belt-winner in the centre of it, while somebody

behind played "Cock o' the North" on a mouth-organ.

It was irresistibly funny and commendably brief. Following it, with only the barest interval, came something altogether different. The "floats" were suddenly extinguished, and on to the pitch-black stage there rolled a large imitation of a snowball, phosphorescently luminous. Slowly it cracked from top to bottom, and from its interior came a sound of sleigh-bells. Then a dark figure, difficult to discern, stepped out in a crouching posture, and a hoarse, unrecognisable voice commenced a recitation.

Only a few lines, but how they thrilled the audience! They were taken from the most dramatic part of that eerie play, "The Bells," which made the great Henry Irving famous, and while the boys were shuddering at the weirdness of them the voice died away in a ghostly moan, and the falling curtains blotted out the scene.

Deep silence was the best form of approval of this tense piece of acting, but Wiske broke the spell by saying loudly:

"Fine! Who'd ever have thought the kids had it in them?"

He did not know, until days afterwards (when the secret became too hot to hold) that he had been unconsciously extolling the work of his arch-enemy, Blenkin major, who had given the Skylarks a lift by devising and carrying out the whole scheme.

Novelty followed novelty in rapid succession. Some caused derision by failing to "come off," but it was generally conceded that "young Blenk" had shown gumption and brightness of outlook in his choice of "mystery stunts," which were never allowed to hang fire.

If they did not " get across " the footlights straight away, Blenkie ruthlessly rung down the curtain and pushed on something else, and it was after the failure of " Stars " Chilcot to tell the fortunes of members of the audience by the planets under which they were born (" Stars " took stage-fright, and small wonder, when so many of them yelled their birth-months at him) that the youthful stage-manager made the hit of the evening by introducing " Tattered Tom," and leaving that strange-looking youngster to perform at his own sweet will.

Nobody could identify " Tattered Tom." He seemed to have stained his face in some way—possibly with walnut-juice—and to have been the rounds of the rag-and-bone shops to scrape up a wardrobe which baffled description.

A Tattered Tom he was in sorry truth, but nothing he wore was shabbier than his extraordinary hat—one of the billycock variety, such as bloods of the Victorian era wore on high days and holidays—a hat green with age and broken at the crown, through which a tuft of knotted hair protruded like reddish-brown seaweed.

Cat-calls and ridicule greeted his appearance. He was advised to see his hatter, his tailor, and his barber without delay, and incidentally to drop into a grocer's shop for a bar of carbolic soap. While all this counsel was being howled at him he waited in statuesque silence, with dark eyes flashing scorn at his tormentors, until something in his proud bearing won the sympathy of the seniors, who sternly ordered the juniors to shut up and give him a chance.

When order was restored Tattered Tom began to whistle, and in a second the whole theatre became still as a church to hear him.

The songs of birds throbbed in the air. Tattered Tom imitated a soaring lark to begin with, and a listener could have shut his eyes and fancied himself transported to a sunlit meadow, with an invisible skylark's notes showering down on him like golden rain.

He reproduced the twice-sung carol of a thrush, and piped and fluted like a cherry-stealing blackbird.

He electrified the hearers by faithfully copying the melancholy hoot of an owl, and dropped whimsically from that into the gentle cooing of woodland turtle-doves. Then away he rippled into the saucy stave of a cock-robin and the " ring-o'-bells " of the chaffinch, with the warning cry of the raven and the deep-throated " caw, caw " of the rook as a contrast to them.

There appeared to be no sort of bird-music which he could not mimic to the life. The cries of sea-birds were familiar to him, and he rounded off his songs of the feathered world with a glorious imitation of a nightingale.

Waiting for no applause, he straightway delighted the juniors by mimicking the inhabitants of a farm-yard—the wing-flapping cock's crow, the gobble-gobble of turkeys, the quacking of ducks, the lowing of herds and the braying of a donkey (how consumedly the whole audience laughed at this !). Then he swung into a realistic rendering of two fighting tom-cats—the funniest of all—and wound up with a rousing fox-hunt, imitating the sharp bark of the flying dog-fox and the frantic snapping of the hounds' jaws as they bore down upon their quarry and killed it.

The curtains suddenly shut him from view as a great storm of cheering swept the theatre from end to end.

Tattered Tom was the hero of the piece. Nothing could successfully have followed the performance—it had dimmed all else as a full-moon eclipses a glow-worm—and Blenkin major, in his wisdom, compelled his minor to declare the entertainment at an end.

Senior Ashes crowded behind the scenes in the hope of seeing and congratulating the clever young mimic who had captivated them. They were puzzled and piqued to see no sign of him.

"I say, young Blenk, where's your little bird-warbler?" Cyclo imperiously demanded. "Trot him out!"

"Yes, young 'un, let's see your wonderful mystery man," Wilf urged, less arbitrarily.

Blenkie was trembling with excitement. His breath came in quick gasps, making his speech disjointed as he answered:

"I—I'm sorry, Gwynn, but—but he can't be seen, really. He's our biggest secret. Not fair to give him away. Wants to remain—remain—oh, I can't think of the word just now."

"Anonymous?" Bexon suggested.

"That's it—anonymous."

"Then the little beggar's as modest as he's clever," Wally commented. "Marvellous thing, modesty—rare virtue!" He looked significantly hard at Wiske as he spoke; then continued, "Blenk, old lad, *you* know something of your minor's star artiste. Tell us his real name."

"I'll take my solemn oath that I know as much about him as you do—which is *nil*," Blenk earnestly replied.

"Then the plot thickens," Bexon commented.

"Out you go, everybody, and leave the Mystery Men time to clear up before supper."

"First of all, though—if you don't mind, Bex—we'll have a whip-round for the Darts Club," Wilf said. "The show's been worth far more than we paid at the door, hasn't it?"

"Oh, rather!" the seniors heartily concurred.

"Then brass up, you men—no change given for bank-notes!"

The laughing captain found an empty pencil-box and passed it round for contributions; and that night, with £3 4*s*. 10*d*. under his pillow, the happy leader of the Skylarks slept scarcely a wink at all.

CHAPTER XI

IN GIPSY MEADOW

"An inhuman wretch,
Incapable of pity."
SHAKESPEARE: *Merchant of Venice.*

Two letters sent gleams of imaginary sunshine into Wilf's study on the following Wednesday afternoon.

"I am seizing the chance of a blank 'halfer' to seek ferns this afternoon," the first brief missive ran. "Will you go with me, Gwynn? Meet you on Bracken Ings at two o'clock, sharp."

Wilf swung his arm round in a whirl of delight. "Good old Marchmont! He's a man of his word," he softly cried. "Ferns won't be easy to find at this season of the year, but never mind—we can have a jolly old jaw about things in general. Now for this other letter! The postmark's Buttingham. That means the Butts have answered my challenge—snubbing me like all the rest, I suppose."

With this fear of a further rebuff in his mind, he received instead a charming surprise.

"I have pleasure in acknowledging your kind letter," wrote the polite captain of Buttingham, "and beg to say that we shall be happy to meet your team here on November 1st, and on your ground on February 14th. If you agree, please confirm these dates."

"And the excellent man has actually enclosed a stamped postcard for a reply!" Wilf exclaimed, with

a long-drawn whistle. " Stick to it, Wilf, old lad," he encouraged himself by adding, " and your Soccer club will be ' Ashwinnin United F.C.' at the finish. I must place this topping letter on the notice board, even if it looks like a bit of swank."

Bexon watched him pin the letter up, and would have jumped for joy when he read it if Schoolhouse juniors hadn't been near. A head prefect must always remember his dignity on such occasions !

" This will snuff out half the grizzling in Schoolhouse, Gwynn, old man," he predicted. " Square your elbows and write to other schools. Four matches before Christmas will be worth fourteen after it, you know."

Wilf gave him a comprehending look. Well did both know that their work was being keenly watched and the measure of their popularity taken. In almost any school, anywhere, a captain or a prefect must carry the sporting crowd with him if he hopes to succeed. No omission he can possibly make will handicap him more than failure to provide his schoolfellows with lively games.

The Buttingham letter came at precisely the right moment to revive flagging interest. November the first was so close that it behoved ambitious men to get busy if they wished to figure in the first team, which many more than the required number did.

Only Strode and his fellow-rebels in Schoolhouse, and Lantern's King's House clique, held seriously aloof from the practices, though Wiske, for one, was not so blind to his own interests as to let Guyes persuade him to cut footer out.

" Nay, nay, Lantern, have a bit of ' common ' ! " he reproachfully replied. " I'm the school's only goal-

scorer, and these Buttingham men will be small beer compared with the Placids. You'll see me marching back with a hatful of goals that day."

"If Gwynn picks you to go," was Lantern's chilly reminder.

"He jolly well can't help himself," Cyclo confidently stated. "There'll be a riot if he doesn't!" Which was precisely the high value Wiske always persisted in putting on himself.

Bexon cheerfully agreed to take charge of the practices while Wilf went fern-hunting. "You've earned an hour or two off, old boy," he said, "and Schoolhouse will rally round me better in your absence, that's a cert."

"Make 'em love me a teeny-weeny bit more, Bex, if you can," Wilf laughed.

In Marchmont's company, among the seas of brown bracken on the Ings, he had no trouble in banishing the cares of captaincy from his mind. The mellow autumn sunshine shed its light over heath, hill, and pasture, and the search for rare ferns, though far from successful, was a sheer joy to the enthusiastic young collectors.

Sometimes a startled rabbit would scurry away as they pottered about the prickly furze; at intervals moorland fowls rose with a wild whirring of wings; and once they saw a sinewy, snakelike form gliding through the bracken.

"A hagworm," Bruce pronounced it.

"What beautiful black-and-white markings it has," Wilf observed.

"Yes, hasn't it? A lovely, harmless little reptile; yet, if a yokel saw it, he'd slash it to pieces with his spade, fearing it might bite and poison somebody."

"You like to go into these natural history details, Bruce?"

"I do, Wilf." (They had soon slipped into this familiar manner of address.) "There's more lasting satisfaction in such things than in football even."

"I believe you," Wilf readily conceded. "There's been small satisfaction in footer at our school, anyhow, since you put it so hard across us the other week."

In response to Bruce's sympathetic inquiries, he proceeded to recount his difficulties in arranging a fixture list, concluding with a reference to the report of Ashwinnin's licking in the *Shires' Morning Mercury*, "which," he ruefully said, "practically put the lid on our chances of arranging matches this season."

"Who sent the report?" Bruce asked.

"Why, one of your fellows, I suppose."

Bruce's eyes widened. "Then you suppose wrongly, Wilf. We're forbidden to send reports of our matches to the Press. Our sportsmaster would skin anybody who did."

"But—but it read just like——"

"Trumpet-blowing from our side, eh? No, no, old man; what was there to boast about in whacking an entirely new team? Whoever reported it, a St. Placid's man didn't—be sure of that."

"You should know your men, of course, Bruce. But why should anybody else bother himself to show us up in the *Mercury?*"

Bruce shrugged his shoulders. "I leave that to you, partner," was his non-committal answer. "If it gravelled your chances as much as you say, you ought to hunt round for the fellow who wrote it."

"Hunt where?"

"Nearer home than St. Placid's, anyway," Bruce confidently said.

The train of thought thus started in Wilf's mind was brought to a sudden stop by the sound of a boy's voice, piteously shrieking for mercy.

They looked at each other inquiringly, but at first could not tell from whence the outcry came. Then a frightened dog of the poaching type came scampering through the whins, giving them the clue they wanted.

"This way, old man," Bruce said. "Sounds almost as if murder were being done."

"I know who it'll be," Wilf declared, with sudden conviction. "The gipsies!"

He was right. The winding path through the bushes led them to a gipsy encampment, in the centre of which a bearded and ear-ringed gipsy was lashing a screaming boy with a horsewhip, and all the while pouring forth a torrent of abuse in the Romany language, not a word of which could the school captains understand.

They needed no interpreter, however, to tell them that the poor youngster was suffering agonies under the cruel lash, which the strongest horse could not have endured without wincing.

Bruce was the first to reach the scene and raise his voice in protest. "Here, that will do, you big brute," he flashed out indignantly. "Show a bit of mercy, man!"

The gipsy turned a darkly scowling face on him. "Hold your noise, cully," he grunted. "Hit *you* next!"

"Oh, will you? Try it on and see," Bruce retorted. "The police aren't a mile off, and bullies like you have been jailed before to-day."

To show his contempt for this threat, the gipsy uttered a guttural jeer and once again brought the lash down on the crying youngster's back. The lad straightened himself in a jerk of pain and cast an appealing glance at the schoolboys; whereupon Wilf, who had been silent hitherto, gave a sharp cry of recognition.

"Why, it's Tattered Tom!" he exclaimed.

The boy was obviously too terrified to answer to his name, but there was no doubting that it fitted him. Beyond all possibility of mistake, he was the tattered bird-warbler and animal-mimic who had so brilliantly distinguished himself among the Mystery Men in the school theatre, and the discovery was so great a surprise to Wilf that he could do no more than stand and stare at the youngster's dirty face, down which the tears ran ceaselessly.

Bruce, on the other hand, was less interested in the victim than in ways and means of dealing with the oppressor. Though not powerfully built, the man looked nail-hard and wiry, as people who live in the open air, winter and summer, must naturally be.

"You seem to know the family, Wilf," he said, while thinking hard what to do.

"Only the young 'un," Wilf replied. "Heard him called Tattered Tom, but that may only be a nickname."

"Are you game to teach this brute what's what, Wilf? I say, isn't it a shame? He's at it again! Come on, Wilf; flesh and blood won't bear it; let's wrench the whip from him."

They made a simultaneous dash forward, and in their youthful impetuosity succeeded in doing more than they expected. They charged the astonished

gipsy to his knees, and before he could make an effort to rise, Bruce sharply cracked the captured whip within an inch of his nose.

"Promise you'll stop swishing this unlucky kid, or you don't get up until you've had a good hiding yourself," the captain of St. Placid's dared to say.

The savage fury of the man's primitive nature flashed in his dark eyes, but he saw that Wilf, not to be outdone, had picked up a stick and was standing ready to use it if need be, and against two such formidable weapons as whip and cudgel, he deemed it wiser not to contend.

"Ease up, cully," he growled. "Not so free with that whip, mind. You handle it badly."

"And you're too smart with it," Bruce retorted.

"He's a lazy, good-for-nothing tyke, that boy is," the gipsy complained. "We sends him out selling baskets and clothes-pegs, and what does he do instead? Sprawls on his idle back in fields, a-blowin' out his front teeth, whistlin' to birds. I arsks yer, cully, is that the way to earn his share o' the rabbit-stew?"

Bruce argued about this in his haughtiest St. Placid's manner, while Wilf longed to question Tattered Tom concerning the way in which Blenkin minor had smuggled him in and out of the school to give his bright performance. It was on the tip of his tongue also to say to the sullen gipsy, "Why, man, you should be petting your boy instead of thrashing him; he could bring you in a little fortune if you sent him on the stage." But prudence dictated silence on these matters, lest the boy's nocturnal visit to Ashwinnin should plunge him into still deeper trouble.

"But I'll have a severe word or two with Master

Blenkin the younger," Wilf promised himself. "There'd be a fine row if Old Maltkin knew that a wild boy of the woods had been disporting himself on our brand-new Schoolhouse stage!"

Bruce's somewhat high-flown theories about "common humanity" and "fatherly affection" made little or no impression on the gipsy's toughened conscience, and it was plain to see that he was only awaiting a chance to bounce up and regain the whip. Wilf therefore took up the argument in a less lofty but more practical style.

"I say, gipsy man, are you aware your tribe is trespassing by pitching its tents here?" he began.

The Romany gaped up at him in quick alarm at that. "Garn, cully!" he answered.

"That's what *you* will have to do if you don't take care. Shall I tell you who owns this land? Sir Oswald Dyde, who bought it when he built the school. So our headmaster could throw you out, neck and crop, if he liked."

This new point of view instantly altered the gipsy's attitude of sulky defiance. He began to whine in canting phrases. The young gent "would never be so mean as to split on Gipsy Sim," he said. His honourable tribe had lived there years before the school was built, harming nobody, respected by all; it would break the heart of his grandfather, King of the Fetto tribe, to be driven away in his old age; the young gent must surely see what a cruel thing it would be to do!

"Not half so cruel as you are with your whip," Wilf replied.

"But who's to know you're not lyin' to me, cully?" Gipsy Sim said, with sudden suspicion. "This is the open heath, belonging to nobody."

"That's where you go astray. I've seen a copy of the deed in the school library. It says 'all that close or parcel of land known as Bracken Ings,' and there's Sir Oswald Dyde's seal on it. So if we've any more bother with you, gipsy man, out you go."

"You don't really mean it at all, kind young gentleman." The man's fawning manner was more repulsive than his sulky one, but Wilf saw that he was frightened and tried to clinch the matter by answering:

"On my life, if I ever hear of you whipping your boy again, or even laying a finger on him, I'll tell our Head about it. He hates flogging like poison, and will shift the lot of you, bag and baggage."

Bruce's opinion of Ashwinnin's captain went up a peg as he saw Wilf's masterly handling of an ugly situation. The gipsy man's bold demeanour had given place to one of odious humility. There was nothing he would not do to oblige a gentleman, he said; furthermore, he vowed that he would never touch a hair of his son's head henceforth, let the lad be as lazy as he liked. Wilf marvelled inwardly at the surprising success of his ruse, while severely replying:

"Mind you stick to that promise, then, or it will be the worse for you. Come on, Marchmont; I think he sees which side his bread's buttered on now."

With a gesture of high disdain, Bruce threw the whip into the nearest bush and turned away with his chum. They had scarcely begun to discuss the incident when swift feet pattered behind them, and Tattered Tom breathlessly called on them to stop.

"Take this, cully," he panted. "This" was an odd-looking jack-knife with a weirdly-carved handle, which he insistently thrust into Wilf's hand. "Yes, take it, do. I've got lots more," he added, spreading

out his arms to convey that his collection of knives was almost limitless.

"Here, come back, Tom," Wilf cried. "I don't want it, thanks. Bother it, Bruce, the little donkey really thinks he's doing me a kindness, I suppose. What on earth shall I do with it?"

"Keep it as a souvenir of the occasion," Bruce smilingly suggested, as they set off back to school. "You can use it as a paper-weight, or pot ferns with the blunt end of it, you know!"

CHAPTER XII

THE RETORT UNCOURTEOUS

"They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them."
SHAKESPEARE: *Much Ado About Nothing.*

BLENKIN MINOR turned a red and abashed face to look intently at the ferns which St. Placid's captain had given to Wilf.

"I do declare, Gwynn, I've forgotten to water them!" he cried. "There's some spiffing rain-water in a tub outside. I'll skip downstairs and——"

"You'll stay here," Wilf sternly cut him short, "and answer my questions, please. Never mind the ferns; they're not thirsty, and I am—for information."

"Y-yes, Gwynn."

"I ask you again, where did you pick up Tattered Tom, and what excuse have you to offer for your thundering cheek in bringing him to school?"

"It's awfully funny you should have learnt about it, Gwynn," was the evasive reply. "If that blab-mouthed little ass, Attick, has been letting on to you——"

"I don't share Attick's confidences, thanks! Nobody's 'let on,' younker. I and Tattered Tom met this afternoon under the greenwood tree, so to speak."

"And—and he told you I—I'd hauled him in through the carpentry-shop window? The sneak!"

"Ah, now the cat's out of the bag! He told me

nothing, but you've told me a great deal. The carpentry-shop, of course! Just behind the theatre, looking into Skylark Lane. Very convenient entrance for a nimble young gipsy man, to be sure!"

"I—I've given myself away, Gwynn."

"You have, young 'un, with both hands, so you may as well tell the tale, and let it be the true one, mind. When *did* you start chumming up with Tattered Tom?"

"You—you won't let it go any further, w-will you, Gwynn?"

"I make no promise. Be straight about it and see."

So the fag was straight about it. Not without picturesque detail, he told how he and Appleton had followed a lad who asked them to join him in a rabbit hunt, and how they had heard the yelp of a dog and the death-shriek of a rabbit, and yet, when they had caught up to the boy, he had neither dog nor rabbit with him.

"I was just 'kiddin'' you," he had explained. "There ain't a dog nor yet a coney; I made them noises like this." Then he had repeated the scream and the yelp, and chattered like a jackdaw when they jumped.

"I couldn't let such a chance slip—could I really now, Gwynn?" Blenkie appealed. "He did everything we asked him to imitate as easy as falling off a log, and Appy gave him twopence and I gave him four 'whispers'—fancy, he'd never seen sugar cigarettes before!—and we promised him twice as much if he'd come and be a Mystery Man for five minutes or so."

"Bribery and corruption," Gwynn commented.

"Eight 'whispers' and fourpence! No wonder he fell!"

"It was the very day of the show, Gwynn, and he said he'd be sure to turn up, because the tribe had been having a birthday, and Gipsy Sim—that's his father, you know—was dead drunk and wouldn't miss him. He didn't need his face making up——"

"Nature and grime had sufficiently disguised him—I see!"

"And you know what a knock-out 'turn' he gave. I'm fearfully sorry if I did wrong in any way, Gwynn, but—but——"

"You think the end justified the means, eh? Now listen to me, my enterprising fag. Old Maltkin loathes gipsies. Wriggles gave us a lecture on George Borrow's 'Lavengro'—a book your brother will lend you if you'd like it—the other night, and when the debate started Mr. Malt got up and played old steam about it. Said gipsy tribes were rogues and vagabonds, scum of the earth, pests of society, and so forth. You follow me?"

"Y-yes, Gwynn."

"Well, if he thinks them as bad as all that, what will he say if ever he learns that you have actually had one of the brood in Schoolhouse, on the stage of his own pet theatre?"

"He'd be awfully w-wild, I suppose, Gwynn," stammered the now repentant culprit.

"Not half, my word! I'd something to do to persuade him to let you have the stage at all, and should he hear that you brought Tattered Tom to perform on it, it'll be 'the peddler' for you, younker, that's almost certain."

"The p-peddler, Gwynn?"

"In other words, the sack, the boot, the kick-out!"

"Expulsion, Gwynn?"

"I'm afraid so. If you want to stay at Ashwinnin—and I guess, like most of us in King's, you're getting a sneaking fondness for it—I advise you to give the gipsy encampment a miss in future. Strike Tattered Tom off your visiting list—you understand?"

"Yes, Gwynn, but I—I shan't like doing it. He's such a jolly decent kid, really—a bit grubby, and all that——"

"Oh, please don't think I'm finding fault with his style, younker. I hope I'm not such a snob as all that. If he doesn't always soap his ears, it's the way he's been brought up. But I've told you Old Maltkin's opinion of the Fetto tribe, so your blood be on your own head if you're seen rotting about Bracken Ings with Tattered Tom again. Good-night, now! I've another matter to attend to."

The other matter was the final selection of the football team from the many lists which he had experimentally drawn up.

The game with St. Placid's had been no guide to form at all, because the halves and forwards had been almost uniformly rotten on that disastrous day. House matches were little more helpful—men who played well when there was nothing at stake were apt to get the wind up and go to pieces in a contest of importance. Yet he was determined to seek the advice of no one—not even Bexon—believing firmly that other opinions would only lead to still greater mental confusion.

"Here's my team," he said at last, as he made a fair copy of it for the notice board. "It won't suit

everybody, of course. Schoolhouse will cock a jealous eye at it, with seven of our men picked and only four of theirs; but if they won't practise, they can't expect to play. They'll have plenty of time to give me my blessings between now and Saturday, at any rate."

He asked Blenk to pin up the notice in Hall on his way to the library, and then, giving football a back seat, dived into history books again.

Wiske had openly boasted that he would make himself a Christmas box of the founder's prize for English History, and Wilf would have been deluding himself with false hopes if he had concluded that Cyclo was more of a talker than a worker. If Cyclo were an average result of his late school's tuition, then it should never have shut its doors, for already he was well ahead of his Sixth Form competitors in all-round excellence, and some of the masters made no secret of the pleasure his quick answers gave them. In that respect Wiske, like a proud horse on parade, gave them every opportunity of admiring his good points!

The apparent hopelessness of striving against him for the term's prizes was being discussed in the Sixth Form Common-room one day when Fell major said of him, "He's a sort of wholesale brain store, isn't he?"

"Yes," responded Wally, as quick as lightning, "and his own advertising agent."

Wiske's hunger for publicity was ravenous. Almost everything he did verged on theatrical absurdity. He waited, for instance, until a crowd had collected in Hall to see the team for the Buttingham match, and then marched up like a drum major, asking all and sundry the profoundly egotistical question:

"Who's picked besides me?"

Never a thought in his mind, it will be observed, that his illustrious name might not be on the list at all. Such a thing was outside the range of possibility to him. As well send a battle fleet into action without an admiral as attempt to play football without Wiske!

Well, his name was there all right; but his lordly way of objecting to the forwards chosen to support him raised Blenk's ire.

"Do you think the captain's naught better to do than pick players to match your style?" Blenk irritably inquired. "Stop studying yourself, man; you're worse than a girl before a looking-glass."

General laughter made Cyclo bare his teeth. "If you weren't a saucy, one-armed varlet, I'd smite you for that," he declared.

"Off with his head, Cyclo," Wally scathingly put in. "How dare the knave speak such treason of King Harry the Ninth?"

"Well, if Hooky's arm protects him, yours doesn't, Wally, so take *that*," Cyclo shouted.

The blow he gave Wally then was probably harder than he meant it to be, and he called out, "Oh, I'm sorry, old man," the moment he saw that it had cut the prefect's cheek. But Wally, afire with resentment, would have closed with him there and then if Bexon hadn't jumped in between them.

"Wiske, I shall report you for that," the head prefect quietly said.

"What, report *me?*" Cyclo gasped incredulously.

"Yes, even you! I'd report anybody, great or small, for striking another fellow in Hall. And when that other fellow happens to be a pre., well——!"

He shrugged his shoulders and left the sentence significantly unfinished.

Cyclo heaped ridicule on Bexon's decision, but switched off into foolish abuse when it dawned on him that the Schoolhouse man was in real earnest.

"Preposterous, Bex!" he raved. "One Sixth Form fellow simply can't report another."

"I'll leave that point for Mr. Malt to settle," calmly replied Bexon. "It's his house you've misbehaved yourself in! Here he comes, luckily."

The housemaster entered Hall just then and Bexon made no bones about describing what had occurred.

"A grave breach of the rules, Wiske," Old Maltkin sharply said.

"I was provoked, sir."

"You will first apologise to Walworth——"

"I *did* provoke him, sir, and he has already apologised," Wally was sporting enough to say, despite the stinging agony of his split cheek.

"That is as well!" Old Maltkin grimly continued. "It somewhat mitigates, but cannot excuse the offence. Come at once to my study, Wiske—unless you prefer to be dealt with by the Doctor himself."

Cyclo dejectedly chose the lesser evil and was spared the humiliation of punishment in public. He told nobody what that penalty was, but for a week afterwards he sported the oak each evening, so that, putting two and two together, it was transparently obvious that he had been set some snorting sort of impot to do.

The excitement caused by the team sheet spread also to the King's House supper-table. The English master was on duty there, and it had become the fashion to treat him as if he were an inhabitant of Mars rather than a dweller on this sublunary sphere,

so often did he seem to be lost to his surroundings under the spell of some enchanting book.

Taking advantage of the situation, Appy produced his bounce-ball and whispered a suggestion concerning it.

"We'll drop it under the table, Blenkie, and play Ashes *versus* Butts with it. Everybody to kick out anyhow, and nobody to look where the ball is."

"Just blind man's football—topping!" Blenkie agreed.

The "game's" rules were passed from ear to ear, and everybody at the Fourth Form table entered quietly, but heartily, into the spirit of it. It was only possible to judge where the ball was by the expression of the kicker's face and the jerk of his body as he booted it. If you had energy enough, you could kick out continually in the hope of catching the ball as it rolled by, and biscuits were shaken off plates and cocoa was spilt on the cloth in the unrestrained joy of the "match."

They might easily have kept it up till bedtime, with Wriggles oblivious of everything, if "silly-ass Attick" hadn't been baby enough to cry out when somebody's boot accidentally removed a patch of skin from his knee. It was a yell worthy of a scalp-hunting Redskin, and it brought Wriggles swiftly down from the realms of poetry to the prose of everyday reality. At the same moment, by an unlucky chance, the bounce-ball rolled to his feet and he trod on it.

"One needs no nerves in this establishment!" he angrily exclaimed. "Whose is this ball, and who let off that Grand Guignol scream?"

They didn't know what "Grand Guignol" meant, but could see that Wriggles was very wroth indeed.

"Own up, Appy, quick, or you'll lose the ball," Blenkie advised.

"Please, sir, it's my ball," Appy obediently piped.

"And your scream?"

"No, sir, not his—mine, sir," moaned Attick. "I—I hurt my leg under the table, sir."

"Or somebody hurt it for you, more likely," the astute master returned. "I have been half-conscious for some time of a mysterious *thud*, *thud* beneath the table. How many of you have been kicking this ball about? Answer me!"

Blenkie had once seen, at a public meeting, the commanding gesture of its chairman, who had brought the audience leaping to its feet to sing "Auld Lang Syne." He made that grand gesture now, and the juniors manfully responded to it by pushing back their chairs and standing up together.

"We *all* kicked it, sir," Blenkie confessed, answering for the lot.

"Except those who missed, Blenkie," Silloth commented in an undertone.

The housemaster visited swift retribution on them. "You will have bread and water instead of cocoa, cheese and biscuits to-morrow night," he decided. "That should damp your footballing ardour a little. In addition, you will each learn by heart the first twenty-four lines of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan,' commencing with that immortal line 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan.'"

"Bother the man!" Blenkie muttered. "Ramming his mouldy old poetry into our systems like that!"

"With water to wash it down," Appy plaintively murmured back. "Won't we just 'scrag' Attick in the dormy for being such a howling doglet!"

CHAPTER XIII

STRODE'S HOUR OF GLORY

"'Tis an old maxim in the schools
That flattery's the food of fools."
SWIFT: *Cadenus and Vanessa.*

HAMPERS in mid-term were a rarity, and covetous glances were cast at the package which Strode received on the morning of November 1st.

"Fireworks, I'll bet," one longing observer commented.

"Not for a Sixth Form fellow, surely!"

"Well, then, it'll be gingerbread. The usual stuff for Guy Fawkes' day."

"We shall soon see what's inside. He can't resist opening it."

But Strode did resist temptation. Looking self-conscious through trying to appear unconcerned, he grabbed the hamper and whistled his way upstairs.

"Mean hound!" grunted a disgusted critic. "Eyes bigger than his stomach. Wants to eat whatever's inside all at a mouthful, the hog!"

The fault-finder credited Strode with too much gastronomical power there. Strode could scarcely have swallowed and assimilated what he found in the hamper if he had been a boa-constrictor. It was a new Rugby football, of excellent pattern, sent "with Uncle Jim's compliments."

To do Strode justice, this gift was a complete sur-

prise to him. Knowing his uncle to be an old Rugger International, he had written to say how sick he felt at finding himself in a school which only played Soccer so far. Perhaps the phrase " so far " had been taken as a hint of possible developments ; however, there the oval ball was, a bright allurement to the Schoolhouse player who had failed to make good at Soccer.

" After all, why shouldn't we use it ? " he mused. " It's sheer tyranny on Gwynn's part to want to keep Rugger off the grass altogether. While he's gassing about at Buttingham this afternoon, what's to prevent us having a scratch game at Rugger here ? "

His heart leapt at the thought, but sank again immediately as memory bore him back to the last occasion on which he had tried to assert the claims of a rival code.

" He booted my Rugger ball into the canal that day, but just let him try it on with this spiffing new one, and he'll see stars ! "

Strode was careful, nevertheless, to thrust his football into a cupboard and lock the door on it till afternoon, when the Soccer team were well away at Buttingham. Then he swaggered out with it to the football field, and gaily punted it over the ropes. It dropped towards a group of Schoolhouse men, who entered into joyous competition to gather it.

" Hello, Strode ! Having another shot at Rugger, I see," was Hepple's surprised greeting.

" Yes, old man. Can't look a gift-horse in the mouth, you know."

" Lucky Gwynn and Bexon aren't here."

" Pooh ! That much for them ! " Strode snapped his fingers as he smilingly watched the struggle for the new ball. " I'll play the game I like, or not at all ! "

"Rather expensive hobby, though, buying footballs—especially to lose them in canals."

This observation came from "Daddy" Burns, the only King's man near enough to hear Strode's boast.

"Shut up, Daddy! I didn't buy it. My uncle, an old Rugger International, sent it this morning."

"Oh, in that hamper! The fellows will be disappointed then," Hepple remarked. "They rather hoped for a crumb or two of cake."

"Queer sort of egg to put in a tuck basket!" Paddock cackled.

"Your uncle was a foolish man to send such a plaything," said Daddy Burns. "A gun would have been less dangerous."

A solemnly paternal shake of the head accompanied this remark, but Strode brushed unceremoniously past Daddy and jumped the ropes. "Sides!" he shouted. "I'll toss you for first choice, Mac!"

"No, thanks," was MacAllister's hasty answer. "I'll be excused, if you don't mind."

"Oh, you 'pres.'! Afraid to call your souls your own since Gwynn and Bexon put the kybosh on you. Come on, Denny, old lad; you don't funk choosing a side, I know."

Dennison didn't. He was the biggest man in Schoolhouse, with a left-hand push which had steadied even Cyclo (that impetuous boxer) in the gym. But like most good boxers he was even-tempered, and most unlikely to strike any one in anger—which was fortunate, considering his size. He grinned good-naturedly now as he called "tails" and won the toss.

"Not much good naming you as my first choice,

eh, Daddy?" he chaffed the King's House pre. by saying.

"You'll need a spectator or two to retrieve the ball, particularly on the canal side," Daddy was witty enough to retort, with his slow and enigmatic smile.

That was a rub at Strode which the Schoolhouse rebel chose to ignore, though it took a little off the edge of his zest for the game at first. But soon the charm of Rugger captivated him wholly. He took passes unerringly and skimmed along the wing, scoring try after try with graceful ease. He rejoiced in pitting his skill against Dennison, who, despite superior strength and greater weight, rarely succeeded in dragging him down. Goals it was useless to bother about with no tall Rugger posts to steer a ball between, but at half-time Strode's team, mainly through his individual cleverness, were leading by twenty-seven points to *nil*, Dennison's team being bewildered and outclassed.

Quite a crowd had mustered to see the fun, which waxed faster and more furious in the second half, a rearrangement of forces having stiffened Dennison's side into a stronger resistance. Even so Strode was difficult to hold; three men would go for him at once, and he would somehow keep clear of the lot and continue the gallop to the line.

"There's football for you, if you like!" Schoolhouse men exultantly yelled.

"Show 'em what Rugger is, Strode!"

"Good-bye, silly old Soccer!"

"Oh, hooray—a try!"

"And what a beauty, too!"

Strode had excelled himself this time. Beginning in his own "25" at the lower side of the ground,

he had corkscrewed his way through all opposition—swerving, dodging, handing-off, jumping over the arms of would-be tacklers, feigning to pass repeatedly until he had raced finely clear of the last man and planted the ball squarely between the posts.

It was just the sort of sport Schoolhouse had been yearning to see all the term, and they cheered as wildly as if Strode's try had given them victory over some redoubtable college fifteen.

Here, at last, was a games captain after their own pattern, who would have done a good deal more to win the school renown at Rugger than Gwynn, they were sure, would ever do for it at Soccer.

In this jubilant mood, when the referee's whistle piped "time," they rushed into the field and half-smothered Strode with their demonstrative congratulations.

Such worship went to his head like wine.

Already he saw himself, in imagination, the honoured leader of a popular club, totally eclipsing by his refulgence the bedimmed light of Gwynn's setting star. He even permitted his flatterers to carry him to a seat (King Canute mistakenly submitted to something of the kind, history tells us), and from that coign of vantage, with what little breath he had left, he made a few remarks, hardly to be termed a speech.

"We'll form a Rugger Club, men!" he shouted.

"We will!" they cried.

"To-day!"

"Yes, now!"

"The rotten old Soccerites—the nine-oners——"

Loud and derisive hooting welcomed this shrewd hit.

"Shan't have the whole field to themselves——"

"No, no!"

"We'll peg out a claim——"

"We will!"

"And if the school's too stingy to rig up Rugger posts, we'll brass up for our own!"

"Oh, rather!"

"Are you all agreed, men, to form a club this very minute?"

"We are, Strode."

"Then sign your names, all of you, and clinch it."

A sheet of paper was hurriedly procured, and boy after boy appended his signature to what Strode scribbled on it. Some took fright at the thought of committing themselves and sheered off, pursued by scornful reproaches, but Strode gazed proudly, in the end, at fifty or more signatures beneath his own, and could scarcely bear the tedium of tea-time because of his burning desire to make the club's formation public.

At length, seeming to walk on air, he found himself in Hall, accompanied by a retinue of supporters who wanted to see the paperful of signatures triumphantly affixed to the board.

In one of the classrooms a meeting of masters was being held, and the Gunner had just come out to stretch his legs and yawn, meaning to return after he had enjoyed a few whiffs of tobacco in the staff's smoke-room. He was standing in the shadow, charging his pipe, when Paddock, always garrulous, took it into his head to raise a solo cheer.

"Hurrah for the Ashwinnin Rugger Club!" he foolishly cried.

The Gunner immediately stepped out of the shadow and confronted the surprised group.

"What's this I hear about a new Rugger Club?" he pleasantly inquired. "Are you really forming one, boys?"

Relieved by the tranquillity of the housemaster's tone, Strode held up the signed paper.

"We're perishing for—I mean, we want Rugger very badly, sir, and quite fifty of us have agreed to start playing it," he explained.

"How interesting! May I see the names of the bold pioneers?"

Strode hesitated for the fraction of a second before parting with the vital document. Possibly he detected a hint of irony in the Gunner's voice and felt uneasy in consequence; but the request of a housemaster had the authority of a command and could not be denied.

The Gunner ran a frosty eye down the list. "Guyes has signed, I see! Fancy that! Rather a rough game for one of his willowy frame, shouldn't one say? Where does he play?"

"Oh, Guyes doesn't play the game, sir——"

"I thought not!"

"But he—he's going to be secretary, sir, I believe."

"Or treasurer, perhaps? To give Guyes his due, he's wonderfully quick at figures. And to be quick at putting down figures is necessary at Rugger, isn't it? A most piquant list, Strode!"

"Thank you, sir."

Strode was too confused and alarmed to see humour in the Gunner's persiflage. He held out a trembling hand for the return of the list, but the hint was ignored. The Gunner was slapping his pockets, one after the other, in search of matches.

"Dear me, how awkward!" he said. "I've mislaid my match-box. Ah, well, never mind." He passed

leisurely to the mantelpiece, and folded Strode's precious list into a sort of crude spill. "This will make as good a pipelight as any."

He stooped and poked the screwed-up list between the bars of the grate, and Strode cried out in dismay at the action, "Oh, sir, you aren't going to light your pipe with it?"

"No," the Gunner said. "You are quite right—I must not smoke in Hall. Bad example. I'll just burn the stupid thing out of hand—so."

He dropped the list into the heart of the fire, quite undisturbed by Strode's shocked exclamation of horror.

"There go your hastily scrawled signatures, boys," the Gunner serenely said. "A thing done in the heat of the moment, and now appropriately consumed by fire. I like Rugger myself; I prefer it—have played it under shell-fire with whole-hearted enjoyment. But here, at Ashwinnin, I do not expect to play it or to see it played."

"Then, if you please, sir, I call it a great shame," Strode burst out, with a throb of passion in his voice.

"Your castles have fallen about your ears, Strode, and you feel hurt, naturally. Well, there is a better outlet for your temper than that of flying the black flag of mutiny. Come with me to the library; there is a new book there which I'd like you to see."

Looking as dark as a thundercloud, Strode reluctantly followed the Gunner to the library. It seemed to be unoccupied, but the Gunner helped himself to the book he wanted and laid it on the table.

"You observe the title on the cover, Strode: 'Ashwinnin School Suggestion and Complaint Book.' It is an open-access book. Kept always on the counter.

Every master, every boy, every manservant, every maidservant in the establishment is entitled, if he or she has a complaint or a suggestion to make, to write it down in this book, and every week the Headmaster himself comes in to read it. You see my drift, Strode?"

"N-not quite, sir."

"Then I will be more precise. Having played Soccer once and found it not quite your style——"

"I—I was off colour that day, sir."

"You now wish to see Soccer scrapped and Rugger put in its place. Is that a fact or not?"

"All Schoolhouse, sir, is in favour of Rugger, and about half of King's."

"Question! However, say so. Take a pen—here's one, provided for the purpose—and write out your complaint (or suggestion, we had better say) on the front page. Yours will be the distinction, if such it can be termed, of being the first grumbler Ashwinnin ever had. Your name will thus be assured of going down to posterity. Come, Strode; take a chair and write."

But Strode wouldn't. He flushed and paled by turns, fingered the pen nervously, dropped it to the blotting-pad, and gave vent to his feelings in a quivering sigh. "I'd rather not, sir, if—if you don't mind," he stammered.

"You surprise me, Strode! Why this hesitation? I saw no sign of such diffidence when you were about to pin the list of signatures on the notice board. Whence comes your shyness now?"

"I—I don't want to be the first to start grousing, sir."

"Ah, I see! In cold blood, after calm reflection, the thing dawns on you, that it wouldn't be quite a

sporting course to take. You're like a good many others, my boy—you shout with the crowd, but lose your voice when the cheering mob are out of sight round the corner. You're quite sure you won't write something in the book—just a plain, straightforward suggestion ? "

" I'd rather not, sir, really."

The Gunner closed the book and replaced it on the open-access shelf. " As you will," he said. " Take your Rugger ball away, then, and bring it out again only when you're asked for it." His strong hand fell on Strode's shoulder in a grip that made the boy wince as he added quietly and kindly : " Play the man, Strode ! It always pays ! "

CHAPTER XIV

GOOD PLAY AND BAD LUCK

"As high as we have mounted in delight,
In our dejection do we sink as low."
WORDSWORTH: *Resolution and Independence.*

A RAW November afternoon trailed festoons of grey mist across the football field at Buttingham.

One goalkeeper could not see the other, and the referee, rather too slow a runner, sometimes lacked a clear view of the game. Had he been close up, for instance, he would have seen that the Buttingham inside-right knocked the ball down with his hand before shooting the first goal, a simple shot which Bexon could easily have stopped had he not stood appealing for a foul—bad luck for the visitors and undeserved encouragement for the home team, who set about adding to their score with great gusto.

They were a well-balanced side of a rough-and-ready type, charging vigorously but fairly, and swinging the ball about from wing to wing. The Ashwinnin halves—three new men—failed as badly against such tactics as the previous middle line had collapsed before St. Placid's more polished methods. Their tackling was feeble and their forward placing worse, so that a glut of work was again thrown on Wilf, whose partner at full-back—Pit-pat Leatham—was no great shakes in a tight corner, though a distinctly welcome improvement on Strode.

Ungrudging applause repaid Wilf and Bexon for their dashing and determined defence—"best man that's ever kept goal here," the Butts said of Bex—and Pit-pat once earned a special cheer by a quick burst and a clever pass to Cyclo, who nearly scored at the other end—but the repeated blundering of the Ash-winnin halves would have presented goals to a Third Form team, and those spectators whose eyes could penetrate the fog were able, at half-time, to assure less observant Butts that Lampson, their captain, had "banged in two pluggers" and made the score three-*nil*.

Laughing philosophy was difficult to assume in the face of such a deficit. Wilf and Bex did what they could to lift the black monkey of depression from the back of each downcast Ash, and Cyclo pooh-poohed their faintheartedness, boldly declaring that, with the wind behind him (no one else had noticed any wind !) he would soon wipe out the adverse score "off his own bat." But they had heard his tall talk before, and had only partially shaken off their gloom when Wilf, smiling serenely, led them on to the field again.

It was Cyclo's turn to start the ball rolling, and the Butts were hard put to it to repress impolite laughter as they watched him swagger to the centre-line. Such self-importance they had never seen before in any man. Electrons of vanity seemed to radiate from his majestically-poised body. He held his head like an Emperor of old Rome, distended his chest as if war medals adorned it, and swung his arms like a champion walker from London to Brighton. "Absolutely stiff with conceit," Lampson murmured to his colleagues, and they passed each other the wink to knock some of the gas out of him for his own good.

Let it forthwith be written down in Cyclo's favour that he cared not a rap for the rude shaking-up they proceeded to give him. He showed neither surprise nor resentment when Buttingham's burly centre-half charged him head over heels into a patch of mud, but confidently claimed a free-kick for the outrage before troubling to wipe his blackened face—and got one!

"Up the field, you Ashes," he commanded, with a kingly sweep of his arm; and in a trice he had placed the ball beautifully at the feet of Howell, a forward nearly as speedy as himself.

Howell had never had a chance like it since he first donned the colours of Ashwinnin. He just escaped falling over the ropes in his astonishment, made a timely recovery, and decided to do himself and his school honour by dribbling finely and scoring brilliantly. But the imperious voice of the fair-haired centre-forward reminded him that he must attempt nothing of the kind. "Pass back here, you fool!" he was peremptorily told; and in the meek submissiveness of a weak will to a strong one he obediently transferred the ball to Wiske.

The fog had thickened, and the Buttingham goalkeeper had seen nothing of the unexpected sortie. He was flapping his arms to warm himself when one of the full-backs warned him to look out. At the same moment the ball curved towards him, barely giving him time to get his fists to it.

It was a muddy ball, and Leppington was a very-much-off-his-guard custodian, or such an ordinary shot would never have passed between the posts. Probably, if he had let it alone, it would have stuck in the mud and been easily kicked away, but by striking it hastily and disadvantageously he deflected

it from its leisurely course into the corner of the goal, and Wiske, from whose boot the successful shot had come, strode chestily back to the centre-line, one of the greatest of sporting celebrities in his own eyes, and full of zeal to repeat the performance.

He did it, too! Taking a flying leap at the ball as Lampson restarted it, he luckily charged it down, and thrilled and delighted his team-mates by an almost exact reproduction of his great run against St. Placid's. The only variation was that he did not score at the end of the run—his final shot was a rotter, which went yards wide of the post—but from the penalty kick which the referee promptly awarded him when the Buttingham backs both tried to grass him—one by a glaring trip, the other by a rough charge—both foolish and needless offences, committed in a moment of panic. By losing their heads they lost a goal also, Wiske himself taking the spot kick, with Wilf's concurrence, and driving it through the goalie's legs (perhaps designedly, perhaps by chance) into the back of the net.

This dramatic change in the fortunes of the game staggered the Butts nearly as much as it elated the Ashes. They got it into their heads that Wiske must be terribly hot stuff, and tried all manner of means to bottle him up.

Had the Ashwinnin halves been worth a pinch of salt, the equalising goal would have been ridiculously easy to get while half a dozen opponents were trying to bowl Cyclo over and sit on his chest. But the half-backs hesitated and miskicked, and Wilf, disgusted by their bungling, forged ahead himself and rattled the crossbar with a strong drive. It rebounded speedily to Howell, who, in his eagerness to head it back into

goal, miscalculated its velocity and was struck full in the face by the heavy ball.

Nothing could have been more sickening than that, and it put poor Howell quite out of the game. Altogether dazed, he was assisted to the touchline and thence to the dressing-room, and his colleagues saw no more of him till the match was over.

That accident, alas! quenched the fresh fire of the Ashwinnin forward line, and it died away to a flicker as the home team's confidence returned. The Butts ceased paying undue attention to Wiske (who was really a spent rocket now) and gave their minds to combination, thus making the visiting halves look more than ever like swaying maypoles, finest of things to dance round.

Once more the Ashwinnin rearguard had all the donkey-work to do, and they were cheered repeatedly for their dour pluck in holding the fort. Only two out of two dozen storming shots defeated Bexon's watchfulness in a fifteen minutes' continual bombardment, and at this strenuous stage Pit-pat was doing by no means badly.

Whatever Leatham's failings as a defender, he had none as a tryer, and a fellow's whole-hearted willingness to do his best excuses some of his imperfections. Therefore, it was particularly unfortunate that Pit-pat should be the victim of Ashwinnin's second mishap. He had deserved better of Fate than to be sent to earth with a broken collar-bone, which the school physician afterwards pronounced it to be.

Nobody saw how the distressing mishap occurred, but all agreed that it was a pure accident, Pit-pat himself having only the vaguest recollection of it. As in Howell's case, it had something to do with the

heading of the heavy ball—no use trying to explain the cause of the sudden snap, which occurred so near "time" that the referee's whistle was actually between his lips to stop the game. Play would have ceased in any case, so much were both sides depressed by the plucky full-back's unmerited misfortune.

"Seems as though we were always to be under a cloud, Wilf," Bex said, when they had helped to make Pit-pat comfortable and left him in the physician's care. "Such vile luck makes a fellow feel hump-shouldered."

"It does, rather," Wilf agreed.

"'Licked again, the duffers!' they'll say at Ashwinnin, when the telegram tells them the score."

"Yes, that's to be expected. They'll say also, when they know about Leatham and Howell, that Soccer's a riskier game than Rugger, though it doesn't look so rough. Schoolhouse will chortle 'Didn't we tell you so?' and lots of fellows will blame 'that pig-headed old Gwynn' for it all. There'll be a vacancy for a captain at Christmas, old lad."

"Not a bit of it," Bex vigorously replied. "Never let me hear you say that again, Wilf. The job's yours now, for good or ill, and you've got to carry on—d'ye hear?"

"Yes, I hear," Wilf said, looking gratefully at his staunch chum, "and I only wish there were a hundred Bexes to talk to me like that! For it's beginning to press rather heavily on my napper, this captain's cap, old lad."

"Yes, I know," Bexon sympathetically responded. "But I say it again, Wilf, and I'm sure you mean to do it—carry on!"

"I will, never fear, old boy," was Wilf's quiet but firm avowal.

CHAPTER XV

A CLIMBING SKYLARK DISCOVERS THINGS

"Caught in a copse without defence,
Low we crouched to the rain-squall dense."
HENRY NEWBOLT: *The Adventurers.*

THERE being no compulsion about Ashwinnin sport, and none of the stimulus which match-winning gives to a school, Soccer suffered a serious set-back after the ill-fated Buttingham match.

Even King's men broke their promises to turn out on practice days, and Wilf, having no power to force them into the field, spoke a few straight words to a mixed group of the slackers in the Hall.

"Look here, you fellows: don't imagine I'm going to run my blood to water by chasing you out of holes and corners," he said. "On the notice board behind you there's a call to practice. Do you intend playing?"

"What's the use, Gwynn?" Dennison asked, with a yawn. "It's all a farce."

"So many cheerier things to be done," murmured another Schoolhouse man.

"Soccer's no cop, with brain concussion and broken collar-bones to risk," slyly said a third.

"There's a darts championship to be settled in the gym—admission free," said Paddock, the jester, with an inane titter.

"Quite a crowd of us fancy a spell of hockey this afternoon, too," said Lorimer, a Schoolhouse man.

"That's perfectly all right, Lorimer," Wilf surprised them all by saying, in even tones. "Hockey deserves a fair trial, like everything else. I only wanted to learn what you all thought of doing. I know now, and can act accordingly."

He stepped to the notice board, took out a crayon pencil, which was red at one end and blue at the other, and printed the word "CANCELLED" in blue letters, diagonally across the practice-call. Then he initialled it in red.

"'That all who run may read,'" he briefly quoted. "It's too fine an afternoon to waste on grizzling slackers. I'm off for a walk instead!"

Some of them had the grace to look ashamed of themselves as he swung round and left them to their own devices. Others chuckled gleefully, believing that the captain had thrown up the sponge and decided to let footer "go hang." Matters had come to a sorry pass when they could rejoice over such an inference, and a few of the sounder-hearted Ashes were rather severe in their criticism of Wilf's action.

"Captains shouldn't desert sinking ships," said a disappointed Soccerite.

"Doesn't that rather depend on the ship?" Daddy Burns asked. "If it starts off with a big hole in it, cracking wider and wider every day"—he spread out his ungainly arms to illustrate the breach—"he'll be a fool to go down in it, I should think."

From the steps of the Schoolhouse they saw Wilf go swinging down the road to Gipsy Meadow with the air of a man who finds one form of exercise as good as another. Not the boy to be seen eating his heart

out, this cool captain of Ashwinnin, who could be so smilingly civil at most times, so brutally candid at others!

A parcel of junior Kings followed him to the gates to give him a send-off cheer. He turned, waving his hand laughingly. (The captain of St. Placid's would never have done such an undignified thing!)

"I say, isn't old Gwynn a topper?" his fag enthused. "He didn't half tick off those moon-faced Schoolhouse slouchers, what? Did 'em down a treat!"

"Rather!" Appy agreed.

"Made them look as sick as setter-pups," Silly said.

"Idle, good-for-nothing, Schoolhouse bags-o'-bones!" Blenkie resumed. "And Lantern Guyes and his gang are worse still. Old Gwynn did just right to tell the wasters to go to Bath!"

"*Did* he tell them that?" naively inquired Booker minimus, the smallest of the Skylarks.

Blenkie looked down on him in patronising pity. "Say 'plums, prunes and prisms,' my little man," he recommended. "You're too young for this world. Have two birthdays a year, just to catch up."

"Why, the youngster's right, Blenkie," Attick intervened. "Gwynn didn't tell them to go to Bath."

"Perhaps he didn't in so many words, Attick, but if he'd sent *you* to bath—with a little 'b'—you'd have found time to wash your face, wouldn't you?"

"I always do!" Attick protested, indignantly and truthfully.

"Then why use charcoal when white soap's provided?" returned Blenkie, never at a loss for sar-

castic words. "However, that's a matter of taste. Who's for footer this afternoon?"

There was no enthusiastic response.

"Rather a fag, footer, when you can't scrape two sound elevens together," Silly, the constitutionally lazy Skylark, objected.

"We licked Schoolhouse four-*nil*, so we can afford to take it easy," Popple major said.

"It's as warm as summer," Edgcomb exaggerated. "Phew! I can't bear my overcoat on."

"Too steep for footer, really."

"What about the woods, you Skylarks?" It was Silloth who made this picturesque suggestion. "Cooler there by chunks."

"Great stunt!" Popple major exclaimed. And he performed a bearlike dance, singing "Let's all go to t' woods, ses Robin o' Bobbin," as he had seen and heard "mummers" do in North-country Yuletide entertainments.

The proposal sounded romantic. It would be odd if some little adventure were not encountered in the Whisperdale Woods, where merry outlaws of old had flouted the King's foresters while they ate venison and quaffed nut-brown ale.

But Blenkie recalled certain solemn words of warning which Wilf had given him and Appy; and he wondered if it would not be wiser to veto the proposed excursion. The call of the wild silenced the voice of prudence, however, and he weakly gave in, merely saying, to safeguard himself in the event of awkward developments:

"No nosing around the gipsy encampment, mind. You'll be having the woods put out of bounds if you do. Old Maltkin's got his knife in the gipsies

—he'd drown 'em all in a saucerful of tea if he could."

"Who wants to see mouldy old gipsies? Not us!" Silly said. "We're after pocketfuls of fir-cones to shy at Schoolhouse ticks, aren't we, men?"

"That's all," the other injured innocents concurred.

With many a qualm for his desertion of football, but salving his conscience by reflecting that his fag-master had set the example, Blenkie fared forth to the woods at the head of his Skylarks, meaning to keep them sharply under observation all the time. That soon proved an impossibility. The tall pines shut out the November sun, and the gloom of the woods sent delicious thrills of expectation through the party of young explorers. Booker minimus, a voracious devourer of highly spiced literature, suggested a game at once.

"I'll be Ralph Wildblood, the young heir of Whisperdale, held to ransom by brigands," he lisped, "and you can send a rescue party to find me."

"Who can?" scoffed Blenkie. "You'll jolly well be what you are, Booker minimus—a silly little, dotty kind of dunce—and heir of nothing or nobody. Come to heel, you naughty pup!"

But Booker minimus had fired the imagination of the rest, who begged their leader not to spoil sport by taking a stuffy view of things. In vain he tried to assert his authority. Even while he was picturing for them the awful consequences of Old Maltkin's wrath if they were seen on the borders of the gipsy encampment, a party of "bandits" had slipped away with the captured "heir of Whisperdale," and his

eyes could not follow them through the deep shadows of the trees.

"Let the chumps go—don't anybody dare to follow them," he frantically commanded.

Not a farthingsworth of use to issue orders! The lure of the woods drew the dauntless "rescue party" from his influence, and he turned back to Appy, his only true companion, with clenched hands and teeth, vowing vengeance on them all.

"I'll dig a hole and bury Booker minimus under his old bandit books, Appy. I'll dot Silly's eyes till he's colour-blind. I'll pull handfuls of Attick's hair out. I'll—I'll—well, wait till they come sneaking back, that's all, and they'll mighty soon know what I'm like when I'm mad. You're the only Skylark that'll want any tea, old chum, I promise you."

He adopted a futile attitude of rolling up his sleeves in preparation for the fray; then pulled them down, selected a fairly dry log, and moodily seated himself.

"This is what we get for cutting footer, Appy," he groaned; "a rotten afternoon on our own."

"There'll be nothing very special doing in yonder," Appy answered, with a consoling jerk of his head towards the depths of the wood. "Feel how muggy it is. We'll have a drop or two of rain presently."

Sure enough, the sun had disappeared and the atmosphere had grown oppressive. Thunderstorms are not unusual in November, which is often a mild and clammy month. A flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the gloomy wood, and between the trees huge raindrops began to fall.

"Oh, I say, how rotten!" Blenkie cried. "We can't stay here—trees are dangerous in thunderstorms."

"Where shall we go? To — to the gipsies' tents?"

"Not on any account."

"The other men will."

"Let 'em! It's more than we're going to risk, old lad, after what Gwynn said to me. Scoot off to Whisperdale; somebody will take us in."

They rushed out of the wood, pelting along the lane, under black rainclouds which almost turned day into night.

"Great Cæsar! I can't stand this," Blenkie shouted. "Here's a house; let's ask them to shelter us."

"We can't go in there," Appy yelled back.

"Why not?"

"It's a public-house."

"No, it isn't. It's a sort of club—the 'Peep o' Day,' they call it."

"But we're not members."

"Oh, hang it all, Appy, you don't half chuck the 'buts' about! Run into the yard, then. Perhaps there'll be a garage or something. Any port in a storm."

There was no garage, as it happened, "Peep o' Day Club" having taken up its quarters in a very old house, but a dilapidated ladder was reared against the side of an empty hayloft, and up this the boys scrambled with all speed. Once inside the loft, they took off their caps and coats and wrung pints of water out of them.

"That game of bandits in the wood will be a rare old washout now," Blenkie said.

"They're sure to make for the gipsy encampment, Blenkie, and you can't blame 'em," Appy charitably

answered. "Hark to the rain on the roof! It's like a volley of musketry."

"Can't complain that this old place isn't well ventilated, either," Blenkie observed. "It's full of cracks. Look at that gaping hole over there! I can see right through it into one of the club rooms."

Appy, absorbed now in watching the rain beating through the damaged roof, could not hear this remark above the raging of the storm, so Blenkie, without repeating it, went close to the gap in the wall and peered through.

It was mere boyish curiosity that took him there, and nothing was further from his thoughts than the notion of playing the spy. But what he saw through the crack in the wall held him rooted to the spot, not for a fleeting minute only, but for a longer time than he knew.

Seated at a rough table in the middle of the raftered room were the two school captains, Gwynn and Marchmont, while opposite to them was a pale man of melancholy aspect, whose eyes, seen in the rays of a poor paraffin lamp, seemed familiar to Blenkie, though he could not quite recall where he had seen them before. On the table were a few sheets of foolscap, freshly written on, and some newspapers, which gave the impression of having been creased and handled over and over again.

"It is generous of you to take the risk of coming here to help me, boys," the weary-eyed man was saying.

"Not at all, sir," Wilf answered.

"Yes, it is, particularly as this club has a bad name in the district. They call it the Wild Men's Cave, and it's not considered respectable to be seen in it. Yet

the Wild Men have given me a refuge when every other door was closed to me—me, a convicted forger of manuscripts, a man who has 'done time' for obtaining money by false pretences."

"It's a lie, sir," Wilf burst out. "We don't believe you guilty, either of us."

"Certainly not," said Bruce.

"I know it—you would not be here otherwise. But I hate myself for letting you come. Each of you the captain of a big school—what a blow to your prospects if you are seen in my company on such premises!"

"We don't care, do we, Bruce?"

"Not a button-top!" Bruce firmly answered.

"You have told us your name and what you are, sir," Wilf went on, "and quite enough besides to show us that you did nothing wrong, and we're game to help you with your papers whenever you have anything you need copying."

"It's splendidly self-sacrificing of you both—I can never be sufficiently thankful." The man's voice shook with emotion, and the listening boy at the gap in the wall thought the tone as familiar as the eyes were, but still could not recollect where he had heard it. "What luck for me," the man continued, "to find you grubbing about among fern-roots, and to have enough knowledge to guide you to the rarest of them! That won your hearts, I know, before ever my tale of woe did."

The captains laughed at this, and their merriment brightened the man up a little.

"You're good lads, very," he said. "I thought my chance had gone when cramp and neuritis struck the pen from my fingers. To whom else could I have trusted my urgent appeals for justice? Where was the

money to come from to pay lawyers to do it? You are aiding a perfect stranger to try and prove his innocence of a crime which has ruined him socially and financially. Why should you? What concern is it of yours?"

"I should have thought it anybody's concern, Mr. Lidgett, to help a man up when it's no fault of his that he's down." This time the answer came from Bruce, and there was a touch of the dignity of St. Placid's in it.

"Thanks, my boy, ever so much. You and Gwynn, between you, have revived my fading hopes and failing pluck. Already, with your encouragement to hearten me, I see a faint glimmer of the dawn of a brighter day."

"That's right, sir; buck up!" Wilf cheerily said.

"I'll try! But do not stay here longer, and don't venture to come again—far better to meet occasionally, as if by accident, in Bracken Ings, where we have the excuse of a mutual hobby if interruption comes. The storm is over; see, the skies are clearing—the evening star has risen."

"Happy omen, sir," said Bruce.

"It is, I'm sure, my dear boy. Go out cautiously, do; I should never forgive myself if you were caught leaving this unpopular place by one of your masters."

It now occurred to Blenkie, as the trio in the club-room warmly shook hands on their compact, that he had been shamelessly listening to some very intimate and perilous confidences indeed. Not more than half of the talk had been clear to him, but he had seen and heard enough to make him sympathise with the sad-eyed man, whose deep distress was obvious even to Blenkie's boyish and immature understanding. More-

over, he had now remembered where he had seen the man before.

"It's he who gave me that shilling for making him laugh," he muttered. "If that man's a criminal, I'll eat the soles of my boots!"

In response to a call from Appy, he turned back into the loft.

"Hope you've seen all you want to through that hole," Appy sarcastically observed. "If not, pray have another squint. It's awfully jolly sitting here doing nothing. I'll stay all night if you like. If we get hungry, we can eat the hay, I suppose, like any other pair of donkeys."

Blenkie hesitated a moment, and then, confident that Appy was to be trusted, told him the whole story in whispers. Appy said "Scissors!" and puckered up his lips in a noiseless whistle.

"Well, that beats the band!" he said. "I'd give a trifle to know who the real forger was."

"Gwynn and Marchmont are on his track—they'll run him to earth, never fear!"

"But great Scott, what a shindy there'll be if they're spotted in this musty old club!"

It was now quite fine, and the two Skylarks descended the ladder of the loft. An attendant at the club eyed them wrathfully, but they dodged past him into the lane, meaning to trot back into the woods to pick up the main body of Skylarks before returning to Ashwinnin for tea.

An incident of significance, however, brought them to a dead stop outside the yard gates.

Nearly opposite them stood Lantern Guyes, arm in arm with that lumpily built celebrity of St. Placid's whom his chums called "Hotpot." They were staring

open-mouthed at the clubhouse door, the crumbling steps of which Gwynn and Marchmont were descending.

"That's torn it!" Blenkie groaned. "They're in the soup now, Appy—the two captains, I mean."

"Why, Blenkie?"

"Oh, Appy, where are your wits? Lantern's a Wiske man, isn't he? And he'll buzz it all over the school that he's seen Gwynn coming out of a low club. Hotpot'll blow the gaff at St. Placid's, too, though that won't matter to us."

"Why so excited, Blenkie? The captains don't seem to mind. They've stared Lantern and Hotpot out of countenance."

This was superficially the case. With every indication of light-hearted indifference, the captains had cut Paul Pry Guyes and Peeping Tom Hotpot dead, and were sauntering down the lane as though a visit to the Peep o' Day Club were of no more moment than a casual call at the tuckshop.

"That's all very fine—they've got to keep their chins up—but the Wild Men's Cave is a shocking hole to be seen in, and I guess the beaks would think it worse than being with gipsies even. Not a word about it from us to anybody, mind."

"Trust me!" said Appy.

"Oh, botheration! I do hope old Gwynn will come to no harm through this," Blenkie reflected, in fluttering anxiety for the welfare of the fagmaster whom he had made his hero.

CHAPTER XVI

LANTERN DOES DETECTIVE WORK

"'Tis slander,
Whose edge is sharper than the sword, whose tongue
Outvenoms all the worms of Nile."

SHAKESPEARE: *Cymbeline.*

IN Skylark Lane there were two little shops—one kept by an elderly dame, who was so deaf that you had to hold up your money and point to the sweets you wanted; the other a newsagency and picture postcard store, where boys like Booker minimus were tempted to squander their pence on vilely printed and far from classical literature.

Strange that Lantern, who had already gained the reputation of never spending a penny if a ha'penny would do, should turn into this newsagency, with Hotpot in tow, immediately after he had seen the captains leave the clubhouse, and therein make a great show of choosing a Whisperdale view-card—"to send to the mater," he said.

Not seeming satisfied with the cards in the showcase, he asked a polite question of the grey-bearded and spectacled proprietor.

"Have you got a picture of that pretty old house down the lane, please?"

"Me? Not much!" the proprietor grunted. "Pretty old house, indeed! Some pretty goings-on inside it, if that's what you mean."

"Why, is anything the matter with it?" Lantern blandly inquired.

"Matter with it! Young man, you've not been here long—you're a Hashwinning boy, I see—or you'd blush to ask that! Matter with it! Chokeful every night of the maddest hatters that ever had bees in their bonnets, that house is."

"Socialist fellows?" Lantern guilelessly suggested.

"Nothing so common, me lad! They give themselves lots fancier names than that. If you saw all the rotten rags o' papers they ordered here—well, I wouldn't touch 'em with the tongs, that's a fact, if trade weren't so shockin' bad."

"What sort of papers do you mean?"

"Papers to set the world afire, me boy! Papers that would burn your young eyes out to read 'em! Written by men that would rather go to quod than stand up and bare their heads for 'God save the King'; Guy Fawkes-like men that'll blow up Parliament some morning and build a Peep o' Day Club in its place. Bah!" the old newsagent shouted, getting so warm that he had to wipe his steamed spectacles. "I'd chloroform the whole mongrel litter of 'em, and pull the old kennel down about their ears, if I'd *my* way—mark that!"

"It must be rather a queer sort of place."

"Queer sort of place!" its rabid opponent echoed. "Queer isn't the word. It's an unregistered lunatic asylum. There never ought to have been a new school built within fifty miles of it. I'm 'capped' that Sir Oswald Dyde didn't know better. If he'd asked *me* first, I'd have told him this was the worst spot in Britain to bring simple-minded boys to—they're so easily led astray."

The newsagent's tender regard for the rising generation's morals did not carry him to the point of declining to sell sensational novels, rows of which were on exhibition in his shop. Though Lantern was shrewd enough to notice this, he had reasons of his own for playing up to the old man's eccentricities.

"I'll have this penny postcard, please," he said. "What, twopence for it? Then lend me a penny, Hotpot, there's a good man; I've no more change. Sorry I bothered to ask for a picture of the clubhouse, Mr. Darling; I wouldn't have one at any price now."

"I should think not, indeed. Since I've told you what I *have* told you, keep clear of it!"

"I will! thank you for telling me. What—what would you think of a boy who *did* go there, Mr. Darling?"

"Think of him!" The old man pushed up his horn spectacles to glare at the questioner. "I'd think him a black sheep, soiled, polluted! I'd soak him in carbolic, harmonia, and all other kinds of disinfectant. I'd forbid his schoolmates to speak to him——"

"Send him to Coventry, Mr. Darling?"

"No, sir, *not* to Coventry, but to a desert island for a year—that's how I'd serve him!"

"But that would be expulsion, Mr. Darling!"

"And why not? And *why* not? So it oughter be. A boy that's once been in that wicked club shouldn't be let out of it to eat and sleep and work and play with other boys. Are you aware they harbour criminals in their rooms?"

"Criminals, Mr. Darling!" Lantern was at great pains to draw the old man out on his pet antipathy.

"That's what I said—criminals. One's living there

now: comes out muffled up to the eyes, he does, and won't speak a civil word to a soul. Sneaks off to the woods and moons about there o' nights—no honest man need behave like that."

"Why, what has he done, Mr. Darling?"

"I don't know, and I don't care, but I'll swear he's a wrong 'un from top to toe. So's everybody that has aught to do with the Peep o' Day Club. Shun it like the plague, you boys; cut off your right hand rather than——"

He ceased shouting as a couple of customers entered the shop, and Lantern tugged Hotpot's sleeve as a sign for departure. "Weigh anchor," he murmured; and when well clear of the shop bared his long, irregular teeth in an unpleasant grin.

"So much for our great Gwynn and your mighty Marchmont, Hotpot! If you're wise, you'll make this afternoon's news useful to you."

"How useful?"

"Well, you told me yourself that Marchmont enjoyed making an ass of you before the other Placids—jumping down your throat for starting harmless rags, and so on."

"Oh, he does that, Lantern, every chance he gets."

"There you are, then! Get your own back at him. You have it cut-and-dried for him next time he tries to show you up. Just whisper in his ear, 'Been to the Peep o' Day Club lately?' and he'll shrivel up like popcorn. You'll see!"

"By Jove, yes—I never thought of that!"

"Nice, decent, pious youths to captain schools, aren't they? Spending their halfers with scum—dodging in and out of rooms where skulking murderers are."

"Murderers, Lantern?"

"You heard what old Darling said. They harbour criminals there, and what's a criminal but a murderer mostly? And didn't he say they were going to blow up the Houses of Parliament? That'll kill hundreds!"

"It knocks me, Lantern. Marchmont loathes me and I loathe him, but I can't really think he'd pal with jailbirds—no, hang it all, that's a bit too thick."

"He mayn't *know* they're jailbirds, but he goes there, doesn't he? Well! that's enough. We've got 'em both on a tight piece of string, Hotpot. *Your* man may be captain next year, if he's lucky; *ours* won't, I'll wager. Gwynn's done for himself this time!"

CHAPTER XVII

LANTERN RESOLVES TO ASPIRE HIGHER

"Such joy ambition finds."
MILTON: *Paradise Lost.*

WISKE disappointed Guyes by not immediately falling head-over-ears in love with the scheme.

"Look here, you know, I want to be captain on my merits," Cyclo brusquely remonstrated. "It's all very well crawling up behind a man to 'down' him—in plays, that is—*Macbeth*, and so on. But I'm not out for Gwynn's blood; only to boot him straight out of his job."

"That'll take you all your time—perhaps more than your time, Harry."

"Oh, blow you, Lantern, for a Dismal Jimmy! Why shouldn't I whack Gwynn 'on the level'? He'll not get the History prizes, however hard he saps. I have them both bottled already. And at Classics he's a brewer's drayman beside me. Some of the beaks know less than I do."

What a preposterous boast it sounded! Yet Cyclo meant what he said. He would not admit that the Sixth contained a brain half so remarkable as his own, and his firm position at the head of his class helped to solidify his tremendous opinion of himself.

"What's more," he added, scarcely heeding Lantern's further insidious arguments, "I've scored all the footer goals up to date, as well as the goal which

beat Schoolhouse at hockey. What about that? I guess the Head notices these things, the wise old guy."

"All serene, Harry, if what I saw doesn't interest you," Lantern huffily said. "I was daft to bother myself about Gwynn's Peep o' Day amusements, but, rightly or wrongly, I did it to help you."

Cyclo softened instantly. "Of course you did, old man, and it's awfully decent of you," he answered. "Gwynn's certainly not fit to be captain, if what you say is true——"

"I saw him with my own eyes, I tell you, coming out of that cut-throat club with Marchmont. They're birds of a feather."

"Be sure your sins will find you out," Cyclo self-righteously quoted. "If they're rotting about with Peep o' Day riff-raff, they can't keep it squat much longer. I've got a clean slate, Lantern, and I don't want to mess it up by figuring that Gwynn's a club-crawling waster. Let it come out by itself, old man, if it's going to. I'll have no truck with it."

"Oh, won't you?" Lantern furiously sneered. (He was talking to himself now, Cyclo having got in the last word and departed.) "Well, if you can't bring your high and mighty self down to it, somebody else may, perhaps. What price me?"

The sudden thought set a pulse throbbing wildly somewhere in Lantern's heart.

If Gwynn could be toppled off his perch, what might not a bright and brainy fellow do to supplant him? Not in games, of course—Lantern hated violent exertion of all kinds—but even if a Schoolhouse man—Bexon, for instance—took the captaincy in the New Year, why shouldn't the head prefect of

King's be Guyes—Guyes the scholar, Guyes the leader (popular with scores, he fondly imagined)? Then it would be but a step to the displacement of Bexon, too!

It was worth the effort, anyhow, he reflected. Wiske had had the chance and spurned it—let him look to himself now, for in a battle of wits Lantern would trample over friend and foe as Danes and Norsemen of old had clambered over heaps of slain to lay waste towns and villages. It was his misfortune to be born as unscrupulous as he was undeniably clever. No kid-gloved fighting for him! Tooth and nail or nothing.

"I'll have a dip in the lucky-bag, whatever comes or goes," he decided. "There's a chance for everybody this term, and brain may count for more than brawn in the end."

CHAPTER XVIII

WARM PLAY AND A COOL ENDING

"'Tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart."
SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet.*

WILF had persevered in approaching likely and unlikely schools, paying extra postages himself, in order, if possible, to fix up a match or two before Christmas. He might have been trying to borrow money of them, they were so chary of replying. The few answers which came were all refusals, more or less polite in tone, one captain candidly explaining that a team which St. Placid's had beaten by eight goals was not good enough for *his* team.

Thus did that wretched report in the *Shires' Morning Mercury* (the source of which was still a mystery) pursue the captain of Ashwinnin like a shadow all the while.

"I don't want to show you a face as long as from here to next summer, old man," Bexon said, "but honestly, if we don't buck up and find the Soccer boys something to do, it'll be all Rugger next term."

"Think so, Bex?"

"There's such a powerful gang working for it. Strode's still grousing night and day, even if he funks trotting out his uncle's gift-ball again. He doesn't know that *we* know all about what happened in the library, through sly old Blenk being behind the shelves

when the Gunner was showing him the complaints book."

"Blenk should have coughed or shuffled his feet or dropped a paperweight, really."

"I don't agree, Wilf. He was in his own room, and the Gunner probably knew it. It's daft being too fastidious with men like Strode. He doesn't spare *you*."

"Quite flattering to have envious rivals," Wilf chuckled. "Wiske in my house, Strode in yours, and perhaps a dozen others that I haven't yet heard of. Heigho! Saturday to-morrow, and all the old weary business of beating up practice teams to go through again! 'A match, a match, my kingdom for a match!'"

It ought to have happened just then to be thoroughly dramatic, but it was exactly six and a half minutes later when Blenkie ran into the study with a telegram.

"Collared it from the messenger-boy, Gwynn. The little ass was taking it into the Schoolhouse, where they'd have very likely opened it and read it—oh, I didn't see you, Bexon! Sorry!"

"Never mind Bexon's feelings, younker; pass the wire," Wilf approvingly said. "Who on earth can have thought it worth while to send *me* this?"

"I hope nobody's ill at home," Bex said.

"It isn't that." Wilf had opened and read the message by now, and his face was aglow with sudden pleasure. "By all that's wonderful, the match I sighed for has turned up! Weaponess College want us to go there and play them to-morrow."

"Ridiculously short notice," Bex commented. "What's their reason for changing their minds?"

"Oh, they're quite straight about it. Read the wire, old man; it explains itself."

Bex made a wry face as he read the message out: "'First team opponents cancelled match here. Pleased to play you instead to-morrow afternoon if you can come. Wire to-day, Hardacre, Weaponess College.' Well, old man, I consider that fairly cool," Bex remarked. "He should have signed himself 'Hard-shell Hardacre.' Chilled cheek, some would say."

"Why, Bex?"

"It's plain enough why. They kept you waiting over a month before they answered your challenge with a curt 'No!' Now, when they're suddenly left with a blank date, they've the sauce to expect us to fill it up in a hurry."

"Well, yes—put in that way, it looks rather perky," Wilf admitted.

"I suppose they think we're like starving dogs, glad of a bone that's chucked at us. Haven't sent a reply-paid form either—more impudence! In your place, Wilf, I shouldn't do a thing."

"Ignore it, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Simply can't afford to! Must pick up a little windfall like that with both hands. (Don't stand about here, Blenkin mi.; cut away out of it, there's a lad!) It's corn in Egypt. You'll be glad of a game yourself, Bex, just to keep your hand in."

"That's right enough, but that cheeky wire sticks in my gullet. 'We need a stopgap, so you'll do'—that's what it amounts to. They haven't even offered us a return date."

"Leave that to me, old lad," Wilf confidently said. "I'll see they do the fair thing by us. Now, if you'll cease bristling and sit down (instead of trying to make

poor old me sit up!) I'll show you a bit of team-building, with four old and tried players as a foundation."

Laughing at all Bexon's criticism, he selected a team on sweeping new lines. Only he himself, with Bexon, Wiske and Howell, remained of the eleven which had previously played. Bexon rubbed the back of his head in bewilderment as he tried to grasp the startling transformation in the team.

"I say, you've picked Daddy Burns as right full back!" he cried incredulously.

"Why not? Sound as a bell, steady as the Inchcape Rock."

"And slow as a funeral! You're not serious, Wilf?"

"Never more so, Bex! Doing the best I can with Pit-pat still on the injured list. From a scientific standpoint, a kid's pea-shooter would blow holes through that team; yet I believe it's a team of tryers, and I'm going to let it have a try!"

Bex shook his head gloomily several times, but ended, as he always did, in supporting Wilf up to the hilt. He swooped down like a hawk on a group of Schoolhouse men who were deriding the team in Hall and condemning the jumped-up character of the match, and rated them far more soundly than Wilf would have troubled to do. He withered Paddock with a look when that amateur jester pinned on the board a so-called parody of "The Lost Chord," which ran like this:

"Seated one day at his table,
G. wired to Weaponess.
'Wipe your boots on us while you're able,
We're your doormats now, Weaponess.'"

"Tear down that piffling rot, Paddock, and hand it to me," the head prefect commanded.

"It's only a wee bit of fun, Bexon—no offence meant," Paddock faltered, in a fright.

"I want it—pass it along," Bex insisted.

Obeying meekly, Paddock endured the humiliation of having the crumpled paper thrust roughly down his collar, while Bex's finger-nails (perhaps with intent) scratched him in three places.

"The next verse of that insulting kind goes down your throat, Paddock—remember that," the angry prefect warned him.

But in neither house could censorious tongues be silenced. "Who wants a toady and a dirt-eater for a captain?" certain sections of King's asked. If Gwynn couldn't get matches without humbly taking up other people's cast-offs, they argued, he'd far better own up like a man that he spoke through his hat when he said Soccer was the only game for Ashwinnin. They weren't going to let him "mug 'em about" much longer, they vowed; if *they* had been picked to play, they would have refused to go squirming up, like scared puppies, when the Weaponess captain whistled.

Beneath this cataract of criticism Wilf remained mute and unmoved, but the new members of his chosen team had rather a hectic time of it. "Don't play—you're fools if you do," was repeatedly said to them, and in King's an attempt—believed to have originated with Lantern—was actually made to coerce them into striking their names from the list.

"To save you from making asses of yourselves," the bullies said, as an excuse for their threats of violence; but Daddy Burns put a stop to their little

game, when it was on the point of succeeding, by ponderously approaching the Gunner's door and making as if to knock on it.

"Sneak!" somebody cried. "He's going to peach."

"No, I'm not," Daddy answered, in his slow and solemn way. "I'm going to ask Mr. Boon if a prefect may cane big cads as well as little ones. He'll want to know why, and then——"

Daddy had no need to finish the sentence. They knew that he thoroughly meant to act as he had spoken, and weren't wild enough to risk being beckoned into the Gunner's study to explain themselves. Old soldiers like the Gunner are apt to be bull-headed in matters of discipline! Therefore did they sulkily desist from their coercive operations, and the new team for the morrow had nothing worse to endure than sneers and jeers until bed-time.

How sweet was the revenge they took on their detractors next day! At Weaponess they played so resolutely, if sometimes unskilfully, that they wiped out the one-goal lead which the College held at half-time, and were themselves actually leading until five minutes from the finish, when the Collegiates made a desperate last burst and managed to equalise.

It can be imagined with what delight Wilf telegraphed the result to Ashwinnin, his only regret being that victory had been snatched from their grasp within sight of a triumphant end. But to make a draw on the Weaponess Ground was an achievement which stamped them as a team of promise, to say the least of it, and Bex ungrudgingly admitted that the captain's judgment had been far better than his own.

"I wouldn't have given half of 'em a chance to wear blue-and-gold," he said. "Yet they played up like heroes, every man Jack of 'em—old Daddy Burns especially."

"We've struck a workmanlike team at last, old boy," Wilf gleefully answered. "Not brilliant marksmen—Wiske again had to score the goals——"

"And isn't he just blowing off super-heated steam about it?—not half," Bex interrupted.

"Never mind, old lad; let him open the safety-valve a bit. Goals are goals all the world over, and the man who scores them is entitled to throw his chest out."

"They were soft-looking goals to make a song about."

"But just in the right place, Bex; give our King's sharpshooter credit for that."

"You're a broad-minded fellow, Wilf, I must say. Cyclo will use those goals to elbow you out of the captaincy if he can."

"All serene! He'll not find it a bed of roses, though there's a brighter look about things to-day than ever there's been before."

"High time, too!" Bex remarked, as their motor-coach drew up at the gates of Ashwinnin. "Now for our homecoming! What will it be like?"

Nothing very exciting, evidently! The moon shone on an empty quadrangle, although permission could easily have been obtained, on such a bright evening, to cheer the returning players as they passed the gates.

"A draw doesn't draw them, obviously," Wilf sighed. "Difficult men to please, these Ashes."

Finding Hall deserted also, they abandoned hope

of a congratulatory reception and retired to their respective houses. Bex discovered nobody enthusiastic enough to pat him on the back, but in King's there *was* a bit of a demonstration outside the Junior Common-room, where Blenkin minor had marshalled his Skylarks and held them in readiness to cheer.

The Gunner came out of his study then—not to punish the cheer-makers, as Blenkie at first feared, but to wring Wilf's hand heartily, saying as he did so :

" Well played, men ! This ought to do us a bit of good, Gwynn, so keep up your pecker, my boy."

Blenk, Wally and Pit-pat joined the group after that. " Sorry we couldn't work up a decent ' hip, hip, hooray ' for you, Wilf," Blenk mournfully explained, " but there's some sort of blight on King's to-night. The mildewed Sixth mopes and whispers in corners, or plays great-grandfatherish games on chequered boards."

Wiske spoke before anybody else could, his voice rising sharply to an indignant falsetto. " Precious sort of school *this* is to shoot goals for ! " he asserted.

" You scored both, I suppose, as usual ? " Wally said, curling a sarcastic lip.

" He did, Wally," Wilf hastened to say, " and neat goals, too, which nearly won us the match."

" Stand clear then, you fellows, and give him room to expand," Wally snapped, with the thought of the blow Wiske had given him still bitter in his memory.

And this was the end of the football team's nearly perfect day !

There is a point below which it is not safe to let interest drop, and Ashwinnin's sporting barometer appeared to have sunk beneath it.

" Well, we'd a cold ride home, men, but it's chillier

in here," Wilf paradoxically said. He could not summon a smile to his aid to-night, so acute was the disappointment he felt.

"They don't call us the Oddity Boys for nothing," Pit-pat sadly returned.

"It seems not, old man," Wilf agreed. "However, we'll carry on. Fag, is my fire burning? Righto! I'm going upstairs, where it's warmer, to read a bit before supper."

CHAPTER XIX

A BRIGHTLY SHINING LANTERN

I have touched the highest point of all my greatness."
SHAKESPEARE: *Henry VIII.*

EARLY in the following week Blenk invited himself to tea in the captain's study.

"No, thanks—nothing to eat," he said. "I'm going into training to fight somebody."

"You don't say so, Blenk! Not Cyclo, surely."

"No; he's Wally's mark, not mine. As a matter of fact, I don't at all know who it is I want to fight. I wish I did."

"Tea and toast and riddles, Blenk!"

"Yes, old lad, and a conundrum you can't answer, I fear. Who wrote this account of your Weaponess match for the *Shires' Morning Mercury?*"

"What, another report? We *are* becoming famous, Blenk!"

"Not on the strength of this report. It's a brute! Fellow that's written it is no friend to you, Wilf, nor to Wiske either this time. Get it read, old boy, while I water down this tea. That minor o' mine's been dropping aloes into it, I think; it's bitter. So's that report, as you'll soon discover."

In the customary column of "School Football Notes" Wilf saw and read the following paragraph, ringed round by Blenk in the library's scarlet ink:

"The newly formed Ashwinnin team acquitted

themselves fairly well against Weaponess College, though in making a draw of 2—2 they brought about a result which rather flattered them, College being far below their ordinary form. The two goals Wiske scored were lifeless and lucky affairs, and Wiske would be well advised, in future, to moderate his very individualistic style and try to remember the forwards on either side of him. Another Ashwinnin player addicted to gallery play was Gwynn, the captain, who ballooned the ball a great deal, though the home team seemed unable to profit by the chances which his frequent miskicking afforded them. Behind him, in goal, Bexon was fortunately safe, but Lucas, the home custodian, should easily have saved the weak shots which beat him."

Wilf dropped the newspaper to his knees to take up a square of toasted tea-cake, which he crunched with relish as he said :

"Thanks, Blenk, for bringing this along. It's untrue about Wiske, though a man who didn't understand Soccer might think them milky goals. What *is* news to me is that I played a rotten game at full-back. Honestly, I was neither better nor worse than usual."

"You were tip-top, old boy. Daddy Burns told us so—said you covered up all his blunders like winking when the Wepps were waltzing round him. So this smart Alick, whoever he may be, has lied about you, too."

"The last report cracked Cyclo up to the skies, so the same man won't have written this."

"Won't he ? I'm not so sure. There's the same fluence in the style, anyhow. Whatever his game is, Ashwinnin's gaining nothing by it. We can't blame a St. Placid's man for it this time."

"Nor was it a Saint the last time, Blenk. Marchmont told me himself that they weren't allowed to write newspaper reports. The fact is, he advised me to look nearer home for the author."

"Yes—right here in King's or Schoolhouse, very likely. You've put so many people's backs up, Wilf (asking your pardon, old friend !) that your newspaper enemy may easily be lurking in your own house. The question is——"

"Who is he ? We can't even guess, Blenk ; but of one thing I'm sure : somebody's out to slay Soccer here and dot me one in the eye at the same time."

"My own opinion exactly."

"I suspected Wiske before ; I owe him an apology for that. He's a hard but clean fighter, I think."

"Possibly so, but a chronic gaspot. Don't praise him in front of Wally, that's all. Sorry if I've spoiled your tea, old man——"

"You haven't !"

"No, perhaps not ; I see two toasted tea-cakes less ! Well, Christmas is coming, so cheerio ! Going to the lecture to-night, by the way ? "

"What lecture ? "

"Fancy your not having heard ! It's a lantern lecture, though there'll be no slides."

"Another riddle, Blenk ? "

"Not this time. Guyes is giving it, by special permission, in the theatre, and it's to be called 'How to make Maths Easier.' "

"Well, that's the limit, Blenk ! What a brazen subject. He'll never get an audience."

"Oh, won't he ? Make no mistake about that. He'll have all the mathematical duds in Big and

Small School scribbling like fury in notebooks while he tells them the short cuts he knows by heart."

"Old Sheep won't like it."

"Won't he, though! Old Sheep's taking the chair—for the fun of the thing, I suppose. We've got a sporting set of beaks, Wilf, there's no denying. If only some of the fellows were as decent!"

"They'll average out all right in the long run, Blenk. There's bound to be a few wrong 'uns in every school—I don't imagine we've got more than our share, really."

"You're an optimist, old lad."

"Not such an optimist as to attend Lantern's lecture, though! Don't see the use of it. Why should he give his secrets away?"

"Ah, there's the mystery! He's as stingy as they make 'em in everything else. Perhaps he's decided that his voice isn't really like a corncrake's, after all, and wants to air it on a public platform. 'There's nowt so funny as folk,' as they say up in Yorkshire."

Lantern's lecture proved "good in parts." Old Sheep hid his face in a handkerchief most of the time, trying to smother irrepressible amusement under the pretence of a tickling cough; but he did not interfere with the young lecturer's somewhat startling notions of "making maths easier," though he must have known it would be necessary to upset some of the theories in subsequent classes. A few of the "short cuts" were genuine enough, but were such as had been permissibly used for generations, and could only have seemed novel to very artless young students indeed.

The lecture was a clear and interesting one all the same, and was heard with polite attention to the

finish. Cyclo proposed a vote of thanks to the lecturer in a flowery speech, and Strode, speaking for the Schoolhouse in the absence of its prefects ("nice 'pres.' too," Castle said, *sotto voce*, "who go to kids' entertainments and cut out lectures!") seconded the proposal in flattering terms.

"Guyes has gone up a peg in our estimation, I'm sure, as the result of his very able lecture," Strode wound up by saying rather artlessly. "He's got brains, Guyes has, and we shall all be glad to hear another lecture from his pen—voice, I mean."

First a show of hands, then a vigorous clapping of them, was oil of spikenard to Lantern's vanity. He left the theatre with a metaphorically enlarged occiput, feeling that he had ascended a few more rungs of the slippery ladder of popularity.

"I've touched their hearts this time—got right inside their skins," he elevated himself by thinking. "Three parts spoof, of course—but I can always say, when they make bloomers in class, that they didn't take proper notes of the lecture. Now for ferreting out as much as I can of Gwynn's Peep o' Day amusements. He and Marchmont (odiously conceited snob!) are still rotting around Bracken Ings with a disguised jailbird, and I'll take my 'davy' that Dr. Vollum's not the sort of Head to reappoint a captain like that!"

CHAPTER XX

THE MAN WHO WAS MISJUDGED

"Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'erfraught heart, and bids it break."
SHAKESPEARE: *Macbeth.*

IT was true that Wilf and Bruce were spending odd hours with Mr. Lidgett in the neighbourhood of Gipsy Meadow, which a keen frost had made pleasant to walk on. Fern-hunting was now a poor excuse for these meetings, practically all vegetation having died down; but writer's cramp still rendered Mr. Lidgett's right hand useless to him, and as they moved briskly about he told them what he wished them to put on paper for him, and they did their best to memorise it.

"We must boil down the story severely, boys, or we shall neither capture nor hold the attention of influential people. I have worked it all out in my own mind; the difficulty is to pass it along to you in such a way that you can recollect it."

"I'm fairly quick at shorthand, sir," Bruce said. "Shall I make a few notes?"

"No, no! Too risky! We are here as botanists and lovers of natural history. So poke about with your sticks and examine a few things at intervals. Meanwhile, I'll be as lucid as I can."

They had difficulty in following his shrewd instructions, so interesting did they find his story of misfortune.

"Please begin by writing down that I, Hugh Passmore Lidgett, worked for fifteen years in secret as an 'author's ghost'—in plainer words, I wrote books for another man, who copied them out and published them in his own name. He was well known as Sir Daniel Deepdale, novelist and traveller. I was a nonentity, selling my brains to him for a bare livelihood.

"To save myself from going mad with the shame of my humiliating work, I took up the study of old manuscripts, trudging from museum to museum for that purpose. At last—most unluckily, as it transpired—the thought struck me that it would be amusing to copy these old manuscripts, and, if I succeeded in imitating them accurately, to hang the reproductions on the walls of my humble den as an inspiration.

"I started on the manuscript of a famous Elizabethan play, and that was the beginning of my own tragedy. If only I had made a fearful botch of it, all would have been well; but alas! I copied it too skilfully. It looked like the real thing—I had faked my parchment to make it seem yellow with age—and I foolishly boasted of my skill to Sir Daniel Deepdale, who displayed keen interest.

"'I'd like to see it, Lidgett,' my employer said. 'Bring it along, will you, with the last chapters of our new book.'

"He always spoke of 'our new book' to my face, but it was *his* book when it appeared on the bookstalls! Quite right, too, in one sense, for he paid me a hundred pounds for each novel I wrote! Well, like the vain chump I was, I delivered the copied manuscript with my original novel (prouder of the former

than the latter) and he asked to be allowed to keep the facsimile of the play for a few days.

"I wish, with all my heart and soul, that I had refused his request, but it seemed such a little favour to ask, and I depended on Sir Daniel for my very existence. So I said, 'Certainly, sir,' and thereby spoke my own sentence of imprisonment, for they found him dead of heart disease the next day, with my copied manuscript on the table before him."

He paused in his recital to puff fiercely at his pipe, gazing over the boys' heads with the eyes of a man who is labouring under the stress of a great wrong, and at that moment Wilf thought he detected a sound amid the furze. "Be careful, sir," he warningly said; "a twig snapped just then. If any one's prowling around——"

"It will be some woodland animal, I think, or the falling of a branch," Mr. Lidgett absent-mindedly answered. "It's strange, isn't it, weirdly strange, how things crackle and creak when your nerves are on the stretch! Can you see anything there, Marchmont?"

Bruce, who had been looking under and behind the nearest bushes, shook his head. "All clear, sir."

"Good! I'll lower my voice, all the same. Excess of caution is better than too little. I had reached the part where they found the baronet dead in his chair, with the copied manuscript before him. Most unluckily, he had paid me for my manuscript novel the previous day, and I had cashed his cheque and settled bills with the money. On the cheque's counterfoil they found, beneath the date, the entry: 'H. P. Lidgett, for manuscript, £100.' His nephew and heir at once jumped to the fateful conclusion that the hundred pounds had been paid to me for the copied manuscript on the table!

"I will spare myself and you the painful details of what followed. It is enough to say that I was ultimately accused of selling to Sir Daniel Deepdale the manuscript of an Elizabethan play, knowing it to have been forged. In vain I blurted out the whole truth—they pooh-poohed my story as a wicked fabrication.

"'*You* the real author of my uncle's clever books? Absurd!' his nephew scoffed. 'If, as you say, the cheque was paid to you for an original manuscript, where is that manuscript?'

"I demanded a search in common justice, but nowhere could my manuscript be found. Doubtless, the baronet had a cunning hiding-place for all my work, so that the world should never know I was the real author of the books which bore his name. I had naturally confided my humble *rôle* of 'author's ghost' to no one, so was without proof that I ever wrote the books, whereas a man was found who swore that he had seen me copying the play.

"It all seemed a dreadful dream to me at the time. Again, at the bar of justice, I told my tale—it was utterly discredited as a malicious invention and a libel on the dead. I was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, but released for good conduct at the end of two and a half years.

"What occurred then is the fate of nine out of ten men who have once been in jail. My friends had conveniently forgotten me; my family had disowned me for besmirching their proud escutcheon. But here, in the Peep o' Day Club, lives a successful writer whom I once had the good fortune to befriend. He is a wild-looking man, truly, but you may judge of his heart, boys, when I tell you he has maintained me all these months merely to repay the trifling kindness I did

him when he also was down on his luck. But the galling thing to me is that even he, my benefactor, doesn't quite believe my story—at least, he will not help me to reopen the case, although, with his powerful pen, he could do so much——"

"Hark! I heard that sound again, sir—excuse my interrupting you," Wilf whispered. "There's somebody skulking around, after all."

He crashed into the bushes without hesitation, Bruce doing the same; but once more a blank was drawn.

"Nothing human, thank goodness," Mr. Lidgett sighed. "This sharp frost makes hungry animals daring. In any case, I had finished my story, which you are going to be kind enough to put on paper for me. Shall I seem unreasonable to ask for three fair copies?"

"Twenty, sir, if you wish," Wilf earnestly answered.

They had to cut short his almost passionate expressions of thanks, which greatly embarrassed them, but as soon as he had gone Wilf returned uneasily to the subject of the sounds he had heard.

"I wouldn't go back on my promise for anything, Bruce," he said. "Yet I can't help a feeling that it's going to bring us trouble. I'm convinced somebody was monkeying about in the furze."

"You may be right, Wilf, but can it much matter?"

"Not to you, perhaps—you're pretty well dug in at St. Placid's, Bruce; but there happens to be quite a lot of burrowing underneath my position at Ashwinnin, and one day I may fall in with a flop."

"And will you very much mind that?" Bruce quietly asked.

"Yes, old lad, I shall! A man's a bit of a 'softie,' perhaps, to stick like a mule where the bricks are flying all around him, but I just don't want anybody else to be captain of the Ashes next season. They're a likable lot of fellows, really, and I'm out to save them from themselves, so to speak. Hope that doesn't sound too pi-jawy?"

"No, old man, it's quite the right stuff. The only thing that occurs to me, though, is this—who's going to save *you* if you drop into that hole you've just mentioned?"

"Oh, that's up another street altogether!" Wilf laughed, with a quick rebound to his old sanguine self. "'Who dies if England lives?' Our motto isn't as classical as yours, Bruce, but it rather matches that line about England. 'All for school, school for all,' you know!"

"Quite good enough for any fellow," Bruce soberly agreed, as they parted at the lane end. "Carry on, old man, and I wish you luck!"

CHAPTER XXI

WHY PENNIN CHANGED SIDES

"We skated on stream and pond; we cut
The crinching snow."
ROBERT BRIDGES: *I never shall Love the Snow again.*

WHEN, a week before the term end, an announcement was unexpectedly made that Gipsy Meadow and Bracken Ings must henceforth be considered out of bounds, both the captain of the school and his fag felt their hearts beating hard with apprehension.

Did it mean, thought the captain, that his secret converse with Mr. Lidgett had been reported to headquarters by the spy whom he had heard in the bushes? Was the reason, Blenkin minor wondered, that Old Maltkin had at last learned the story of Tattered Tom's flying visit to the Schoolhouse theatre, or had it become known that some of the Skylarks had sheltered in the gipsies' camp from the November thunderstorm?

Each had uncomfortable hours until Old Maltkin took occasion to explain the ban on Whisperdale's beauty spots. Then they breathed sighs of relief.

"A dangerous nomadic tribe are infesting Gipsy Meadow and Bracken Ings at present," the Schoolhouse master testily declared. "The men of the encampment are unscrupulous rogues—the women are light-fingered sibyls."

"What's a sibyl?" Booker minimus anxiously inquired of Appy. "My little sister's called that."

"Then you'd better call her Sissy in future, kid," Appy answered, with becoming gravity. "It must mean something awful. See how Old Maltkin scowls!"

The housemaster was plainly "in a paddy" as he continued:

"The gipsies took advantage of yesterday's brief snowstorm to remove from the Schoolhouse lawn a square of tapestry, not in itself very costly, but valued by my family for sentimental reasons. The police say that the gipsies deny all knowledge of it, but Susan, the housemaid, emphatically declares that she saw some of the tribe lurking in Skylark Lane, though the driving snowflakes spoilt her view of their faces.

"We have instructed the police to move them on, but they impudently claim a right to be where they are, and simply defy us to drive them away. Until we settle the matter, therefore, it will be perilous for any boy to go near the encampment, and that is why we have been compelled to place Gipsy Meadow and Bracken Ings temporarily out of bounds."

He seemed surprised by their mild reception of the news, forgetting, perhaps, that in winter the attractions of Gipsy Meadow and the woods were small. The main result of the announcement was to provide the funny dogs of both houses with material for catchwords.

"Tap on the tapestry, please," became a favourite expression when anybody approached a door; and "I say, kid, have you seen my Kidderminster?" was a wheeze which Paddock set running through Schoolhouse.

Any one with a shabby study carpet, or an article of apparel worse for wear, was advised to "drop it on the Schoolhouse lawn for the poor gipsies," and among

the juniors there sprang up a new and exciting game, called "Police and Gipsies," with long rolls of stiff paper as substitutes for truncheons and knives.

In short, Old Maltkin's grief for his lost or stolen tapestry became a huge joke, though he fortunately escaped knowing it.

The frost had now grown severe enough to tempt venturesome Ashes into skating. Dodsworth major and McColl, the swimming medallists, decided that the pond wasn't good enough for "classy" skaters, and invited Pennin to accompany them to the canal.

"We can all swim like ducks," said Dodsworth major, "so it needn't frighten us if the ice is rather thin in places."

They cut along finely for a mile or more, with pitying scorn for the timid nonentities they had left behind them on the crowded pond. Then up went Pennin's arms, and down went Pennin's legs, and all in a moment he was splashing madly in the black water, with the ice breaking from him whenever he clutched at it.

Dodsworth major and McColl edged to the canal bank in terror.

"Keep steady, man, and s-swim," was all Dodsworth major could think of to say in his fright, while McColl began to shiver like a reed as he whimpered:

"I don't know w-why he won't s-swim. S-swim, Penny, you s-silly ass!"

In very cold fact, "Penny" was unable to comply. He who had been sent away from a seaside school because he swam too much like a fish, was now seized with cramp so badly that he could not, for the life of him, swim at all!

"Go to him, Dods," McColl wailed.

"Go yourself, Mac."

"He'll d-drown if you d-don't."

"Rot! He c-can't—a crack swimmer like him. S-swim, Penny!"

The panic-stricken and useless advice would have been absurdly suggestive of the old nursery rhyme, commencing "Swim, swan, swim," had a crowd been there to hear; but their voices failed them when they tried to shout for help, and with their knees in the same nerveless state, it might have been the end of Pennin had not three individuals of sterner mettle appeared on the scene. The captain of St. Placid's was the first of them; the captain of Ashwinnin was the second, and the third and smallest person was Tattered Tom, arriving from a different direction. All three got busy with one single purpose—that of bringing Pennin to the side before it was too late.

Tattered Tom intelligently threw into the water the bough of a tree, which Pennin, fortunately for him, had the instinct to grasp. That steadied him long enough to enable Wilf and Bruce to wade straight in up to the armpits, and when this stage had been reached, Pennin was as safe as houses. It took less than two minutes to guide him through the broken ice to the bank, but much longer than that to rub the circulation back into his numbed veins. Tattered Tom helped them heroically in this service, even to the exclusion of all thought for his battered billycock hat, now knocking more holes into its crown against the jagged edges of the broken ice.

"Ye can take him to our camp and get him a drink o' somethink warm," the gipsy boy very hospitably panted.

"Thanks, young 'un, but we must trot him back to

school," was Wilf's grave reply to this courtesy. "Feel like moving, Pennin? Right you are! Best foot foremost, then."

Rescuers and rescued spent the rest of the day, by order, in warm blankets, but were no worse afterwards for their chilly experience.

Dods and Mac, to cover their regrettable failure to assist, were loud in their praises of Wilf, Bruce and Tattered Tom, making a far bigger mouthful of it than Pennin himself did. Pennin did something which pleased the captain better. He entered Wilf's study without any fuss, and shyly laid a new book on the table, saying:

"Look at that, Gwynn, please."

"'Flowers and Ferns for Indoor Beauty,'" Wilf read out. "My word, what a clinking title! Going to lend it to me, Pennin?"

"I—I came across it in a Whisperdale shop," Pennin evasively answered. "Look inside it, Gwynn. I'm off; good-day!"

Wilf stared after him in wonderment as he blundered from the room. "There goes one of the Oddities, if you like," the captain thought. "Fancy a solemnity like that noticing my hobby, and buying a fat book about it on purpose to lend it to me! Actions speak louder than words."

But it was not as a loan that Pennin had left the book. Inside its stout cover he had gummed a label, which bore the inscription, in capital letters:—

"TO MY GALLANT RESCUER,
WILFRED GWYNN,
WITH GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS."

Wilf gave a low whistle of surprise and delight. His eyes were rather moist as he turned the pages and saw

the brilliant illustrations, smelling deliciously of colour-printing inks. It was a joy to handle such an exquisite book.

"Well, of all the young spendthrifts I ever met! This book must have run him into fifteen bob at least. It's too good of the man, but I can't refuse it, of course; I don't want to! Rattling good job the exams are over, or this would tempt me to scamp sapping. Who'd have expected it from such a quarter—one of Lantern's admirers, too! It wouldn't surprise me to learn that he'd given Bruce something just as good."

It was a correct supposition. Not only had Pennin sent Marchmont a beautiful presentation volume, but he had somehow managed to smuggle into the gipsies' camp a parcel for Tattered Tom, who was bereft of speech, when opening it, to find himself the possessor of a cloth cap and a four-bladed pocket-knife.

Not only in this way did Pennin show his heartfelt gratitude. Seeking Blenk in the library, he sank his voice to a confidential whisper as he asked:

"I say, Blenkin major, don't tell anybody, but how can I join the captain's set?"

Blenk raised his eyebrows. "Set of what, Pennin—whist, bridge, tennis——?"

"No, no; the set that sticks to him, I mean. You, for one, and Walworth and Howell and Bexon——"

"I see. You've found out that Gwynn's real jannock at last, have you, and that Lantern Guyes isn't?"

Penny blushed in confusion. "I—I'm running nobody down," was his defence.

"But I am! I think I know fifty per cent. more of Lantern's rottenness than you do, Pennin, and I'll tell you this—if he's seen again sneaking along in

Gwynn's tracks when the captain goes out to see his friends, the fellow he calls 'Hooky' will race up and kick him from behind, and chance what happens when he turns round!"

"I—I know nothing about that, Blenkin major."

"Call me Blenk, man, if you're going to be one of us."

"Oh, may I? I'd like to——"

"We're not so overweighted with support that we can afford to chuck it away, Pennin. Consider yourself a new member of our small but select society. No forms to fill in, no subscription to pay! Just cheer when we cheer, and hoot when we hoot—that's all. See you later. I'm busy dusting books before the hols."

"Chuck a duster across, Blenk, and I'll help you," the earnest new member astonished him by saying.

CHAPTER XXII

CHRISTMAS LAURELS

"He who looks at self does not see clearly;
He who asserts himself does not shine;
He who boasts of himself has no merit."

TAO HEH KING: *Lao Tzŭ.*

IN going over to the enemy, at some personal risk, Pennin had been careful to give no secrets away.

Had he wished to curry favour with his new companions, he could have let a very spiteful and sharp-clawed cat out of the bag.

He knew, for example, that scores of fellows had been quietly told of Wilf's journeys to see "the jail-bird" in Bracken Ings and the Peep o' Day Club, and that the captain spent a lot of time copying out "fishy things" for "the criminal's" use.

"Helping him to blackmail people, I daresay, and then sharing what comes of it," was the audacious conclusion Lantern dangerously drew. "No wonder he's able to brass up well for everything that's going."

Conflicting thoughts bewildered Pennin when he tried to decide on the line to follow. Telling tales of any kind is the schoolboy's cardinal sin. Yet, to simple-minded Pennin, it seemed just as much a crime to maintain silence about a plot against the captain's welfare at Ashwinnin.

He knew that the Head was expected to run the rule over the captain and the prefects at the term end, and that the non-success of Soccer was telling heavily

against Gwynn. Others besides Lantern had seen the captain in the doubtful company of the muffled-up stranger who lived at the Peep o' Day Club—might not that indiscretion be equally well known to some of the masters? Ashes had no actual say in the appointment of their captain, but the Head would be bound to see that Gwynn was far from being as popular, even in his own house, as a captain should be.

All these factors had to be weighed up laboriously in Pennin's mind before he came to a decision, which was to keep his mouth shut and let things take their course—a wise resolution in the circumstances, as the alternative plan of telling all he knew would be certain to stir up a hornet's nest.

Some of the prefects had resigned themselves to the receipt of marching orders—indeed, MacAllister and Fell major, of Schoolhouse, frankly said they would welcome the order of release, and Pit-pat felt no desire to remain in office.

A rumour got abroad that Dr. Vollum would make a pronouncement on the subject when he read out the list of Christmas prize-winners, and speculation was rife as the boys strolled into Hall to hear the results.

"Bexon's about the only pre. sure of his place," a Schoolhouse man remarked.

"Even he isn't," was another Schoolhouse opinion.

"Oh, rats! He's good enough to be captain and ought to be."

"What price Strode as Schoolhouse head then?"

"Dennison, more likely."

"What, *that* great, big, fat, grinning clown? Not so much!"

"Who cares, anyhow, so long as Gwynn's number is up?"

"Wiske will jump above *him*."

"Not as captain, for pity's sake!"

"I don't know. He'll top the exam lists."

"And I once heard him bashfully whisper that he'd scored all the goals!"

"Lantern Guyes may surprise us with the prizes (that rhymes; I didn't mean it to). Recollect his lecture? Full of beans!"

"Prize books by the barrow-load won't win footer matches. I'm for a Schoolhouse man this time—a Rugger captain."

"Hip, hip!" was the anticipatory reception of this sentiment.

Dr. Vollum did not look quite so happy to-day as when they had first seen him at the sports meeting. There he chuckled several times; now he only smiled a little during the reading of the prize list. He had assuredly no reason to be gay, even if there were no great excuse for despondency. But he made no reference to the term's difficulties in his preliminary speech, merely emphasising the need for unity and mutual forbearance until the new school had found its level.

"I doubt if any school ever started its career with a richer endowment of special prizes," he continued. "There has been an insufficient entry for them—probably some of you held back through shyness, which will wear off in time—but intelligence was shown throughout, and the examiners say they were surprised and pleased to find such vigour and brightness in a new school."

The pause he made at this point was obviously an opening for applause, but he seemed annoyed with himself for expecting it when only a few hands were

smitten together here and there, and went on with testy haste to the reading of the names.

"The Honourable Mrs. Dyde's prize for Divinity is awarded to Wiske.

"The Founder's Medallion for Declamation goes to Wiske.

"The Headmaster's prize for Latin elegiacs is secured by Wiske.

"The Classical master's prize for Greek iambics also goes to Wiske."

Four wins for Wiske straight off the reel! The Head's voice had an air of decisive finality, as though there were no other name that could be mentioned in the same breath as Wiske's. It began to look like a clean sweep for the fair-haired egoist of the Sixth.

"Why doesn't he tip the whole tableful of books into Cyclo's lap, and have done with it?" Wally groaned into Blenk's ear.

"Wait a wee, old lad—our turn may come," Blenk whispered back.

As if in justification of Blenk's hopes, the Head's next announcement coupled the names of Bexon and Walworth as sharers of the Governors' Prize for General Knowledge.

"In the strictly literary section," the Head went on to say, "the Shakespearian prize has been awarded to Blenkin major."

"That's what comes of being a librarian," Strode observed in a jealous undertone. "The real goods right under his nose!"

"The prize for the best essay on Georgian Poetry has been won by Gwynn."

This, the first mention of the captain's name, was greeted by a shrill cheer, startling in its isolation, from

the middle of the Hall, where the Skylarks had been anxiously awaiting their chance. The comicality of it raised a laugh, in which some of the masters joined; but it was the first cheer raised for anybody so far, and in that sense was a small but distinct score for the captain.

The next result concerned the four book prizes offered for the best narrative English poem, which were awarded, in order of merit, to Burns, Strode, Bexon and Castle.

"All Schoolhouse men but Daddy," Paddock commented, "and he got on top by accident because of his name—Bobbie Burns, you know."

"Go on! Daddy's names are Absalom Methuselah Pharaoh Solomon Something-or-other. Be quiet: Volley's glaring at us."

The Old Man passed next to the results of three special contests in Maths, two of which were won by Guyes and one by Strode.

"No more mention of Wiske, you'll notice, Blenk," whispered Wally. "Usual game—big burst at first, 'nothin' doin'' afterwards."

Blenk generally ignored Wally's acrimonious references to his *bête noire*. "Only the two history prizes left," he murmured.

"Now for it, then; Wilf or Cyclo!"

"May be neither, old lad. Funnier things have happened."

The hum of voices had already moderated, for all Ashwinnin knew of Cyclo's oft-repeated boast that he had got the two history prizes—the pick of the basket—"weighed and parcelled up." The Old Man was conscious that he had at last secured the full and undivided attention of the school, yet his announce-

ment of the first history contest was a complete surprise to every one—perhaps to the winner most of all.

"The Colonisation Encouragement Society's valuable prize for a short history of 'the Birth and Growth of the British Empire' has, I am pleased to say, attracted the largest entry in the whole series of contests. The Society's Trustees inform me that they consider the essay of MacAllister the best of many very excellent attempts."

Schoolhouse was galvanised into an astonished cheer. MacAllister, the prefect whom they had never taken quite seriously (though he could assert himself at times) had quietly and modestly gained for his house one of the two most coveted distinctions of the term!

"Mac, of all men!" gasped Paddock, feigning to swoon in his chair. "*Now* I can believe anything. They may easily have given the other prize to me, although I wasn't a tryer."

The Old Man did not mind waiting until the buzz of excited comment died down—far better, from the school's standpoint, that they should be noisily interested than politely indifferent!

"The entry for the Founder's English History prize was also a fine one," he continued, after a minute, "but I am asked by the judges to say that they had no difficulty whatever in deciding which was the best of the many essays submitted. They award the prize to Gwynn."

The Skylarks broke again into rapturous adulation of their hero, but this time deeper voices signified pleasure, helping to drown the groans of disappointment which certain groups of men (not all from Schoolhouse) allowed to escape them.

Pennin rose to cheer his hardest, and could not be

pulled down by the coat-tails by two exasperated Kings behind. Leatham and Howell, both sporting losers, yelled "Good old Gwynn" with all their lung-power, and were not reproved from the platform; and Blenk and Wally, while shouting gleefully, kept cool enough to observe that the Gunner was pounding away like a steam engine on the lid of a desk in front of him—acting so much like a light-hearted boy instead of a sedate housemaster, in fact, that the Old Man turned smilingly round on him.

"Wilf's saved, Wally—saved!" Blenk thrilled his bosom chum by crying. "Can you hear me? Wilf's saved, I say—saved, *saved*, SAVED!"

"They'll never chuck him out now, not even for Wiske," Wally exultantly responded. "See how mad Cyclo's looking—hurrah!"

It was an exaggeration. Cyclo looked more stunned than angry—almost as a man does who has been gaping about too much and has bumped into a lamp post. To have commenced with a brilliant sequence of four wins and then to have dropped entirely out of the running—this was the thing he could scarcely credit. Beaten by MacAllister and Gwynn in historical knowledge? Impossible, he thought; some accident had happened to his papers; they had slipped behind the Head's desk, escaped from the package in the post, perhaps been abstracted and destroyed by some stealthy, jealous competitor! Yet even he, with all his boundless self-confidence, dared not suggest such an explanation to Dr. Vollum. He must abide by the result, though not in silence—oh, no; he would let it be known that he deemed himself the victim of some mysterious mishap, which had given his King's House rival an undeserved pull over him!

Staggered though he was, he did not lose hope of a complimentary speech from the Old Man, winding up with an intimation that he would be entrusted with the captaincy next year.

After all, he *had* won twice as many prizes as anybody else; he *had* topped the list of marks for all-round excellence in the Sixth, and he *had* (most important of all, perhaps) scored all the goals in three matches, besides winning games for his house. He was clearly the School's leader in all but name. So why shouldn't it be publicly acknowledged?

"It's coming now," McColl whispered to him. "The beaks have got their heads together on the platform. I saw them looking hard at you a bit since."

McColl had seen nothing of the sort, but he knew that butter of this kind always passed easily down Cyclo's throat, and it was his policy to be "thick in" with such a talented man—a useful fellow to know when one got stuck for a Greek or Latin phrase or two! Also, Wiske gave a supper when anything came off for him, and that was an advantage well worth securing to oneself!

A little further along the front row of chairs was Lantern Guyes, in whom observant eyes could have detected traces of agitation. His high cheek-bones were jerking curiously, and he fingered his long chin with a trembling right hand. He had never ceased to dream ambitious things since the night of his popular lecture, feeling that he had thereby achieved scholastic distinction which none of his rivals could ever attain.

"Ashwinnin has had its sporting captain and failed," was his absorbing thought; "why shouldn't a scholarly captain have a shot at pulling things round?"

Probably there were a few other would-be wearers of the captain's cap who endured the torments of suspense as the masters conferred together on the platform. If so, it was all waste of nervous tissue, for the Head's final remark dashed cold water over their ardent aspirations.

"At the commencement of our work," the Old Man said, "a statement was made that the school appointments would be reviewed at the term end. I have decided, however, after consultation with my staff—and I desire to say unreservedly that no Headmaster ever had a finer set of colleagues than mine—to ask the present captain and prefects to continue in office until next February, by which time the new term will have got nicely on its way. Meanwhile, a very merry Christmas to you all!"

"Thank you, sir, and the same to you," Ashwinnin remembered to say, in the good old-fashioned phraseology of the season; but a fair proportion of it felt rather "sold," nevertheless, at the tame conclusion of the meeting, and even the temporarily re-elected pres. did not seem elated. But the bright-eyed Skylarks, closely watching the captain's actions, saw his unnaturally straight face relax into a happy smile, and took up Blenkie's lead vociferously and joyously when he jumped on the nearest chair to bellow out:

"Three cheers for the good old captain—hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!"

CHAPTER XXIII

WILF CARRYING ON ALONE

"It showed discretion, the best part of valour."
BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER: *King and No King.*

WILF's habit of steering clear of the gossiping centres—the Hall and the Common-rooms in particular—kept him out of much profitless term-end discussion.

"It's only fanning the air, Bex, trying to guess what's at the back of the Old Man's mind," he said. "We're all on trial yet till after the hols., and you'll no more let it spoil your appetite for plum-pudding and mince-pie than I shall."

Bex had come across purposely to sound Wilf's views on the subject, but before he could frame another question the door was opened by Blenkie, who announced an unexpected visitor.

"Marchmont, from St. Placid's, to see you, Gwynn, please," the fag demurely said.

It was plain that Bruce was in some sort of trouble. Bex saw it at once, and showed rare tact in passing out of the study without a word, leaving the captains together.

"Dig a hole as deep as you like, Wilf, and I'm in a deeper," Bruce began. "The Old Man's found out!"

"Found out what?"

"Oh, *you* know—that I go to see Mr. Lidgett at the Peep o' Day Club."

"I say, what bad luck!"

"Isn't it? After we'd been so cautious, too. I asked him who'd split, but he said he'd been told in confidence. Some measly worm of a spy who ought to be trodden on!" It wasn't often the captain of St. Placid's let himself go like this—it needed great stress of emotion to disturb his unruffled demeanour. "I was doing no harm; why should the High-master make such a splutter about it?"

"See here, old man, if you'll tell me the story from the beginning——"

"There isn't a story. I'm just told that my movements are known (in other words, watched) and that I haven't again to visit whoever it is I go to see at the Peep o' Day Club, or else——"

"Well?"

"It's the sack for me next term."

"Oh, ridiculous! Your Old Man can't mean it."

"He's as good as said it. If I stay, anyhow, it won't be as captain."

"But you can't stay otherwise, Bruce!"

"No: I'll be captain there or nothing. So, unless I knuckle under to-night—we break up to-morrow, like you—my box will never again have a Whisperdale label on it."

"Knuckle under to what?"

"Why, do as the High-master orders—have no more truck with the man at the Peep o' Day Club. He's got it into his head that our unlucky friend is a wild character—one who throws bombs through Government office windows, and so on."

"But why didn't you tell him that was absurd?"

"My stars! You don't know our Old Man. He didn't want to argue and wouldn't—had the first and

last words, and gave me a few hours' grace to think it over and choose between 'em——"

"Between St. Placid's and the Peep o' Day Club?"

"Yes."

"Then your way's clear, old man. Sit down, do; you fidget me, prowling about like that! You must hop it straight back and tell him you'll do as he says."

"What, throw Mr. Lidgett over? After promising to do my best for him?"

"You've no option."

"Oh, haven't I? Catch me leaving him in the lurch just when he's persuaded some big bug—a criminologist, didn't he say?—to help him on with his appeal. 'Tisn't like you to suggest it, Wilf."

"*I'm* not going to give him up, but *you* must, Bruce."

"Why must I? I jolly well won't!"

Wilf good-humouredly but firmly seized Bruce's arms and pushed him into a chair. "Sit there, you restless mortal, and listen to me. You've been captain of St. Placid's for four terms, haven't you? And enjoyed each one of 'em down to the ground. It's the job you're cut out for; the more you boss the Saints about the better they like you."

"Oh, I don't know; I've one or two enemies."

"One or two! What if you'd one or two hundred, like me? I'm only an experimental captain—a try-on. If I don't fit, they can cast me off and no harm's done, whereas with you—well, it's altogether different."

"Why is it?"

"Come, now, has ever a St. Placid's captain been chucked out before? Not since A.D. 999 or thereabouts, I'll wager! And you're not going to be the

first to get the sack after all those hundreds of years, old lad—not so very likely."

"But I can't turn my back on our author friend, Wilf; it would look too villainously rotten."

"Why, you billy, do you think he'd sleep a wink for a week if he knew you'd been kicked out through seeing him? Hasn't he always begged and prayed us not to run the risk? What on earth's the good of shifting one thing off his mind if you clap another on it? We're more than half-way through with the job; leave the rest to me; I can do all the copying he wants."

"Then you'll be getting nabbed next."

"I'll chance it. Our Old Man isn't such a hard-shell autocrat as yours; he's more human; he listens to a fellow's troubles and helps him to laugh them down. You're never frightened of standing on the carpet with him; he's just a man, same as you or me."

"Does all this mean that I've got to leave you on your lonesome in this business, Wilf?"

"No, old boy; I'm not a 'feeling-lonely' sort. I shall just see our friend once more, and do what writing he needs during the hols., sending it to him by registered post. You, like a good lad, will go back to St. Placid's, and tell the High-master that you've sawn off the Peep o' Day Club for good—he'll be jumping glad to hear it, I'll be bound!"

"I won't do it," Bruce stubbornly declared.

"You will—you shall—you must! Hear what I'll do if you don't! I'll throw the ferns you've given me, and those we've rooted out together, through the window into the yard; I'll order you out of the study and never speak to you again! Yes, I will, and why?

Because you'll have behaved like a silly ass, getting yourself the everlasting sack for a false notion of what's what, whereas it isn't what's what at all, so to speak. There, I've got it home to you at last; I can tell it's beginning to dawn on you."

Bruce fenced and parried a little longer, too proud to give in without a final struggle; then he suddenly bounded from his chair and gave Wilf a thump in the chest.

"Shut up; I yield!" he cried. "Wilf, old lad, when first I met you I thought you a bit of a sketch; I wondered what your Head saw in you to make a captain of you——"

"I knew you did," Wilf interrupted, with twinkling eyes.

"But now I know you're a real, hard-baked, unbreakable brick of a fellow, without an atom of conceit or malice in your system; a man who'll stick to a pal till all's blue and ask nothing back for it; a man——"

"That'll do, old pal; cut it out!" Wilf quite shyly stopped him. "Have you the slightest idea what time it is? Look at the clock! You'll be late for call-over. Scoot off back and remember not to forget what to do, now!"

"All serene," Bruce resignedly promised. "See you at the station to-morrow. We'll travel as far as the junction together."

"And pick each other up there on the return trip, Wilf predicted. "Cheerio!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE YOUTH WHO FEARED A CHILL

"January brings the snow,
Makes our feet and fingers glow."
Old Calendar Rhyme.

Those boys who bought the *Shires' Morning Mercury* on their way back from the holidays found news in it which set their tongues wagging.

"Free Fight Between Police and Gipsies," the paragraph was headed, and the affray was reported as follows:—

"Friction between the new school authorities and the gipsies at Whisperdale culminated at noon yesterday in exciting scenes at the Bracken Ings encampment. It appears that the police were endeavouring to serve a notice of ejectment on Gipsy Sim the elder, who is the tribe's king, when they were attacked by the gipsies, using the rough weapons of their class. A free fight took place, the police being ultimately obliged to draw their batons in self-defence. Injuries were sustained on both sides, one constable receiving a scalp-wound which had to be stitched. In the end, the outnumbered policemen withdrew, and it is understood that more drastic steps will be taken to evict the gipsies if in the meantime they do not wisely accept the inevitable and strike their tents."

"Oh, I say, why couldn't they have waited a few

days ? Then we could have stood on a hill somewhere and seen the whole jolly kick-up."

The expression of regret for a lost spectacle came from Chubby Ward-Mason, who, with two other junior Saints, had unwittingly entered a compartment which contained three Skylarks—Blenkie, Appy, and Booker minimus, to wit.

The Whisperdale train started from the junction before Chubby realised his mistake ; he therefore made the best of an awkward situation by affably inquiring :

" Anything fresh in the paper this morning, you Ashes, may I ask ? "

Not to be outdone in civility, Blenkie obligingly handed Chubby the *Mercury*, at the same time indicating what he considered the most absorbing paragraph in it. Hence Chubby's rueful outburst, recorded above, to which Blenkie made reply :

" It happened at dinner-time, Chubby, so you couldn't have been there. You'd have been rattling a spoon against your teeth—a spoonful of olive-oil pudding."

" Olive-oil pudding ! We don't have such soppy stuff, man ! " Chubby scornfully retorted.

" Oh, don't you ? Then what is it you *do* eat to make you fat, Chubby ? "

Blenkie's inability to resist this kind of artless quip was a family failing, observable in his elder brother also. Nobody likes being lured into a verbal trap, and Chubby was sensitive about his plumpness, which appeared more noticeable since the Christmas festivities. He sharply resented Blenkie's reference to it, and all in a moment the rival leaders were locked in a close embrace, each trying to overthrow the other in the limited wrestling space at their disposal.

Their struggle was once more fated to end in the smashing of glass. Which of the pair applied the finishing touch was a matter for debate, but a sudden lurch sent the window glass tinkling on to the railway line, bringing in a rush of snow-laden air which sent their fighting temperatures down to zero.

"There, you've done it now, Chubby," was Blenkie's dismayed exclamation.

"Who's done it? I was no more to blame than you," said Chubby. "Don't try to fasten it on to me, you cad."

"You were both to blame, you bad lads," croaked the only stranger in the compartment, a youth of about seventeen, who seemed to be suffering from frog-in-the-throat, and was guarding himself from possible chills by wearing two overcoats, the sleeves of one visibly outstanding beneath those of the other. Also he sported a scarf of vivid yellow–"like a mustard advertisement," Appy whispered to Booker minimus, in superfluously drawing attention to it.

The crestfallen wrestlers would have liked to have requested the stranger to mind his own business, but he was too big a youth to be put in his place like that.

"We'll all have to change compartments at the next station, or we'll get our deaths of cold," he huskily resumed. "Anybody oblige me with coppers for a sixpence? Must get some voice lozenges from a slot machine."

His odd appearance and still odder regard for his health would have raised a titter at any other time, but just now the thought of what the broken window would cost oppressed the Skylarks and forbade merriment. From various pockets Appy scraped up half a

dozen pennies, and the youth in the corner acknowledged their receipt by magnanimously saying :

" Here, I'll make it a shilling. Pay for the broken window with the other tanner, you youngsters—if you can ! "

Blenkie gratefully accepted the small donation and nobly shouldered responsibility for the damage—" as I started the scrap with my rotten joking, Chubby," he confessed. During the brief stoppage at the next station he gave his name and address to the station-master, who wasn't sure, but thought the railway company might let him pay for a new window pane by weekly instalments. " Or they may decide to prosecute yer for wilful damage to their rolling-stock," he made Blenkie unhappier by adding. " It all depends on the mood they're in."

" Oh, well, I'll tell Gwynn about it," Blenkie answered, taking heart at the thought. " Gwynn will see they don't put on me."

" Who's Gwynn ? A lawyer ? "

" Nothing so fusty ! Gwynn's our captain, and the best captain that ever was. He'll look after me, never fear ! "

With this parting testimony to his guardian hero's watchfulness, Blenkie climbed into another compartment, where he waved aside Chubby's offer to deposit half-a-crown at once towards the damage.

" See you later about it, Chubby," he said. " If they ' salt ' me, you know—if the price is too steep—I'll come on to you for a bob or so, but only as a loan, mind."

Chubby sighed with relief as he replaced the half-crown in his leather purse. " You're a topper, Blenkin minor ! " he murmured.

"Rats!" replied the young philanthropist. But it was a rare compliment from a Saint to an Ash, all the same. Old schools couldn't always surpass new schools in chivalry, it seemed!

The well-swathed stranger had transferred his bag to the same compartment, and now, with almost embarrassing generosity, he distributed the contents of five small packets of sweetmeats.

"Caramels and chocolates, those," he explained. "No use for 'em myself. I managed to click the last penn'orth o' voice lozenges—you'll excuse me sticking to those?"

"Oh, not at all—quite, I mean," was Blenkie's confused and caramel-impeded speech. His absent-mindedness was due to a sudden sight of the label on the stranger's bag in the luggage rack. Bold letters thereon revealed its owner as "Lawrence H. B. Lobson, passenger to Ashwinnin, Whisperdale." On the impulse of the moment he exclaimed, "Why, you're going to our school!"

"Of course," Lawrence H. B. Lobson answered. "That's why I'm taking a fatherly interest in you. Saw the Ashwinnin badge on your caps."

"Well!" Blenkie exclaimed; and "Well!" exclaimed Appy and Booker minimus likewise, for all three were astonished and somewhat disconcerted.

A fellow who wore two overcoats, in addition to a knitted vest of blue wool, with a "sissy" silk scarf of gold wound round and round his neck and chest, would surely win the bun as the very queerest of the Oddity Boys at Ashwinnin!

He dissolved a voice lozenge in silence as he watched their faces, reading therein their very transparent reflections on his appearance. The corners of his

mouth twitched a little, as Dr. Colin Vollum's did sometimes, but he gave no other sign that he was conscious of their open-mouthed and unflattering scrutiny.

"They'll shove a big fellow like you into the Fifth at least, I guess!" Blenkie at last succeeded in saying.

"Shouldn't wonder," was the straight-faced answer. "I'll try to live up to it if they do. Mother taught me how to spell, sister taught me how to write, and Dandelion—that's our old gardener—taught me how many beans make five. For a wonder, I've remembered that. How many more stations to Whisperdale, youngster?"

"We don't stop again on this train," Blenkie answered rather impatiently. "I say, you know, we're not such billies as to be chipped as easily as that. We'll all be in Upper Fourth next term."

Lobson apologised. "Sorry, youngster," he said. "Only my fun. But you *were* all staring at me in rather a pop-eyed way, weren't you? Made me think you were barmy for a minute. Hello, here's Whisperdale! I see the school."

"That's *our* school," Chubby stiffly replied. (Let not the funny man in the corner think that old St. Placid's would take to its bosom such a monstrosity as he!)

"Yes, that's St. Placid's—you can't see Ashwinnin from the station," Blenkie hastened to add. "The Saints are terrors at footer—whacked us nine-one last term."

"What was your goalie doing—eating thistles?" was the new boy's coolly impertinent question.

Quivering with indignation at the slur on Bexon's abilities, Blenkie was launching into voluble excuses for Ashwinnin's defeat when his toes felt the weight

of the big newcomer's bag, which Lobson had lifted to the floor with one hand.

"Shut off steam, youngster," he advised, in matter-of-fact unconcern. "Say what you will, there's mustard, ginger or pepper wanted in a school that's let another school get ahead of it by eight goals. Straight up the road for Ashwinnin? Thanks! I may or may not see you again."

Then he swung off alone, carrying his big and bulging bag as comfortably as if it were little more bulky than a tennis racket.

CHAPTER XXV

NEW BLOOD

"We learn through trial."
M. J. PRESTON: *Attainment.*

ASHWINNIN was not full to the doors or booked up for years ahead; it could still accept pupils, and sixteen new boys made its acquaintance in the New Year.

Four were seniors, of whom one only excited much comment. To Lawrence Lobson fell the doubtful distinction of being generally noticed. In Schoolhouse, where he was to board, they quizzed him at first.

"Father a tailor, I suppose?" Paddock speculated.

"No," Lobson mildly answered. "What makes you think so?"

"Your second overcoat. Somebody sent it back as a misfit, eh? Pity to waste it—do for home wear, and all that sort of thing."

"My father," Lobson slowly answered, "is on holiday abroad just now, hunting wild hogs. Fine sport that. You ought to go."

"I?"

"Yes; just to keep the huntsmen going, you know. Hogs get scarce at times. Every extra one's welcome."

Thus was Paddock hoist with his own petard. The only way a fellow can strongly resent being called a hog is to offer to fight the man who calls him one, but the newcomer in the overcoats did not look one whom

Paddock's fists could hurt much. His own hands were nearly twice the size, even allowing for the huge gloves he wore. Paddock therefore faded ignominiously into the background, leaving the laughing group to take stock of Lobson in a new light. The new boy might look a big milksop, but his head seemed to be screwed on the right way, and he wasn't afraid of having it punched, either!

"But see here, new man, why *do* you bung so many clothes on top of yourself?"

Dennison was the inquisitor this time, and Dennison, with a smile as proportionately broad as his shoulders, was different altogether from Paddock. The newcomer gave him a civil answer.

"I wear two overcoats because I am cold in only one," he gravely answered. "Ditto without my knitted vest. Ditto without my scarf."

"But it's the way to catch cold, muffling yourself up like that," Strode put in.

"So most people tell me. Go without coat, go without hat, run bareheaded in a snowstorm. Sleep in a tent all the year round. Wake up every morning and roll into a cold tub. I know all that, but I don't do it. How many of *you* do?"

"Oh, well, none of us, of course," Dennison laughingly admitted.

"We sleep with our windows wide open, though, all weathers," Castle said.

"So do I, but with blankets and eiderdowns over me," Lobson replied.

"And coats and a dressing-gown over those, eh?" Strode slyly inquired.

"Yes, sometimes!" was the frank and unashamed confession.

They all laughed rather pityingly. "We'd call you the Salamander if it weren't too long a name," Castle said.

"Call me anything or anywhere," Lobson calmly replied. "A call to tea wouldn't come amiss at the moment. I like a cup of tea, really hot, at this time of day. I think it wards off many a chill."

Was he serious or not? They could not read his perfectly stolid countenance, but it was impossible not to laugh at him, and it was their merriment which attracted Wilf's attention as he went along to the library, with two books under his arm. He gave a quick glance at the group and saw the new man, but did not pause or speak in passing. Finding Blenk alone in the library, he commented on the newcomer then.

"Rather a rum cove outside, Blenk. Noticed him yet?"

"Rather! He's been in here already. Wanted to know if we took *Poultry*, *Pigeons and Rabbits*, or some such weekly paper. I told him the *History of the Zoological Gardens* was the nearest we could get to that, and he borrowed it straight away."

"Must be from the country."

"Yes, but perhaps not so green as he pretends to be. I've met his sort before. Pity they don't house him with us. Those Schoolhouse wags will rag him."

"Never mind; his back's broad enough. To change the subject, Blenk, are you willing to do me a favour?"

"Always, any old time."

"Then put these two books on the Old Man's favourite shelf, will you? I want them to catch his eye."

Blenk stared at Wilf before reading the titles of the

books. "'Motives,' by Sir Daniel Deepdale; 'Under the Surface,' by his nibs, Sir Daniel, also. Well, if that's about submarines, Wilf——"

"It isn't. They're not boys' books at all."

"Why should we have 'em, then, and how am I going to account for them on the shelf?"

"Oh, say they were presented anonymously, Blenk, which is true, because I'm not the real giver of them. They're good, clean stuff, no end brainy, and I quite expect the Head'll freeze on to 'em at sight."

"He's the keenest borrower we have, that's true, and this looks the sort of tackle he likes best, but——"

"Now, Blenk, old boy, I can see you're bristling with 'Whats' and 'Whys,' and I simply can't let you into the secret yet. It's a perfectly harmless thing I'm asking of you. You can call his attention to the books, and ask him if he thinks you ought to circulate them; that'll show him you value his opinion, and he'll be flattered. I don't care a carrot if you burn 'em afterwards; he's the only reader that matters."

"All right, old boy," Blenk agreed. "You've filled me with curiosity, but I'll bottle and cork it up;" and he skilfully hooked the books into place without scratching the bindings.

Wilf went away happier in consequence, saying to himself, "I hope and believe it will work. The Old Man's a great book-lover; if he goes deep into 'Motives' and 'Under the Surface' he'll get interested in the author, which is *not* Sir Daniel Deepdale, whatever the title page says!"

He was content to wait for the gradual evolution of his scheme, having resolved to make a bold bid for Dr. Vollum's sympathy in Mr. Lidgett's troubles.

Daily he expected to be summoned to the Head's study to explain his visits to the Peep o' Day Club, for why should he expect to escape the ordeal which Bruce Marchmont had already undergone at St. Placid's? It had not occurred to Bruce to suspect "Hotpot" Alder of giving information, and Wilf had not cared to remind him that it was Lantern Guyes and Hotpot who had first watched them emerge from the club.

Hotpot might or might not have been the informer at St. Placid's, but Lantern still had the card up his sleeve at Ashwinnin, ready to play it, perhaps, at the time when the Old Man decided to review the work of the captain and prefects. If he, Wilf, could steal a march on his enemy (he knew Guyes to be that) by getting his yarn in first, he was confident that the doctor would give him credit for sincerity, and perhaps believe Mr. Lidgett's tragic story too.

"It's the first step, anyhow," Wilf murmured. "Good old Blenk has only one hand, but it's a helping one all the time. Without Bex, Wally and him—yes, and his young brother and the Skylarks—I could never have carried on long. Now for something lighter—football, for a start."

He had persuaded Weaponess College to fix the return match for the first Saturday of the term, and to-day there was to be a scratch game to decide if the team which drew at Weaponess were fit to play again. So much can happen to upset a man's form in the Yuletide vacation!

"I've picked Strode as right full-back for the 'Blue' team, Bex, to give him a chance of washing out the past," Wilf said.

"No manner of use, old lad," Bex regretfully

answered. "He won't turn out. You'll be a man short there."

Sure enough, the Blues took the field without Strode, who was nowhere in evidence, and it did not mend matters to find that the "Golds" were also handicapped by an absentee.

"Where's your centre-half, Howell?" Wilf asked.

"Crowbell? Oh, he slipped down to the news-agent's for a magazine—said he'd be back in time."

"Well, he isn't!"

The captain ran a quick, appraising eye over the few men who were standing about in ordinary clothes. Two of them were new to the school, with size to recommend them, if nothing else. Having already made it his business to learn their names, Wilf approached them.

"Play Soccer, Darton?" he asked.

"Yes," Darton answered.

"Centre-half?"

"I can do."

"Right! Take you long to jump into your togs?"

"I could nip up and sling 'em on in five minutes."

"Do so, then, there's a good man, and play centre-half for the Golds." Then, as Darton eagerly cut off, Wilf turned, not very hopefully, to the other new man. "Footer anything in your line, Lobson?"

Somebody tittered as Lobson, still sporting his two overcoats and his yellow scarf, plunged his hands deeper into his pockets and hunched his shoulders, for the east wind was keen.

"Well, I *have* played now and again for the Rats," Lobson said.

There was another smothered explosion of mirth behind them as Wilf asked, "For the *who?*"

• •

"The Rats—Old Ferratt's Academy in Herriburn, you know."

"Herringbone!"

"No, Herriburn—perhaps you don't know the place?"

"I'm afraid I don't! Still, if you can play a fairish game—will right full-back suit you, though?"

"Hardly. I'm an outside-right; that is, when I *do* play."

"That's rather awkward. Still, I daresay we can manage it. Millet, old man"—he turned to the outside-right of the Blues—"will you join me at full-back to-day, and let this new man have a trial on the wing?"

Millet was one of the few Schoolhouse boys still loyal to Soccer, and he wasn't too keen on taking the position Strode had scorned, but he put a good face on it and agreed.

"Thanks, Millet—jolly good of you, old man. Now, Lobson, be as quick as you can about changing; we'll play a man short till you get your togs on."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I *have* got them on," the husky voice of the new Ash responded. "They're under all this"—he slapped the bulky array of clothes which encircled his chest.

"Why, you've come prepared, then!" Wilf exclaimed.

"Yes. Rather gathered, from bits of conversation I heard in Schoolhouse, that there might be a chance of a kick or two. Boots rather shabby"—he raised one foot for inspection—"but they'll hold together, I think."

There was a cordial ring in Wilf's voice as he laughed outright. Here, at last, he had discovered an enthusiast!

"Well, you're a queer stick and no mistake," he remarked. "Peel off your wraps and come on."

"You're sure you're starting straight away?"

"Certainly; we're waiting to kick off."

"That's good enough. I don't want to stand about shivering, that's all. Scared to death of a chill."

At a quiet signal from Wilf, willing Skylarks flocked round to catch Lobson's garments as he struggled out of them one by one—"unwinding a mummy," somebody whispered—and stood revealed, at length, in a plain white football costume. More than a little astonishment showed itself then. The self-coddling fresher, free of his swaddling clothes, looked the picture of a young athlete—clean-skinned and muscular, with limbs that seemed strong enough to run in a schoolboys' marathon.

"By jove, he moves well!" said Wally, who wasn't a player. "What a surprise-packet! Like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis."

"Scarcely that, old friend," Blenk demurred. "More like a well-grown young carthorse emerging from a brewer's yard."

"That suggests clumsiness of feet, and it doesn't fit our high-stepping friend. See how lightly he legs it."

"Running to keep himself warm, I imagine."

But Lobson did more than keep himself warm; he kept others warm too. From the moment that Wilf first booted the ball across to him—wanting to see what stuff he was made of—the new man became a living force, a marvel to his colleagues and a sort of *Flying Dutchman* to his foes.

The Golds could not catch him when he ran, could not stop him when they met him face to face. Weight,

speed and trickiness carried him irresistibly through, and as for those centres of his—well, Wiske was as sick as anything about them, not because he couldn't turn such grandly placed " middles " into goals, but because he hadn't the chance to try, being centre-forward on the other side !

" Absolute ' sitters,' " Cyclo groaned to Darton, the new man behind him, " and Fenner falls over 'em ! Oh, if only I could change sides——"

" Carry on," the new centre-half calmly answered. " Your turn'll come later."

Wiske did get a show later, and he had the other new man to thank for it ; but before that happened Lobson had ceased throwing centres away on the scrambling inside men—too easily put off their game by Pit-pat Leatham (now thoroughly recovered) and Daddy Burns—and was banging away at Bexon's charge with shots that Bex found almost too hot to hold. They didn't decrease in power or fail in direction, either, as the game wore on, and the school goal-keeper was as overjoyed as Wilf himself when, just before half-time, Lobson slammed two great shots past him in quick succession.

No wonder the captain's heart was as light as a singing bird's at the interval ! The fame of the new forward had spread to the uttermost corner of Ash-winnin, and hundreds of men were drawn to the ropes by an irresistible impulse of curiosity.

" And that's the man Chubby didn't want at St. Placid's ! " Blenkie cried, hopping about on one leg in gleeful excitement. " I guess the Saints would swop their old Abbey gateway for him now ! "

" Lobby," as admiring onlookers had speedily nick-named him, shot another flashing goal in the second

half, and saw Fenner at last turn a perfect centre past Bex into the corner of the net ; but he was out of the limelight in the final fifteen minutes, mainly because the other new man was gallantly engaged in winning his spurs at centre-half for the Golds.

Wilf thrilled with delight as he saw Darton feeding Wiske and Howell with glorious passes " all among the daisies," and was pleased when his own best efforts failed to keep Cyclo out of shooting range. Millet's inexperience of full-back work let Howell through for the Gold team's first score, and Wiske got two goals which were practically " popped into his mouth " by the raw-boned but brainy new man behind him, and the end of the most delightful game of the season came with a margin of one goal only between two flushed and happy teams.

" Bex, old lad, we've struck it lucky," Wilf exulted. " An outside-right in a thousand——"

" Don't I know it ? " Bex interrupted, with a smiling pretence at ruefulness. " My poor arms ! "

" He'd have half killed the goalie at *our* end ! And then there's that topping centre-half ; what a fortunate thing Crowbell didn't turn up ! "

" Rather ! Darton's worth ten of him. In your house, too, so we're quits."

" Schoolhouse has the star performer, though. Something for you to brag about, Bex—a better scorer than Wiske ! Do you think Schoolhouse will take better to Soccer now ? "

" I think they will," Bex responded, though still rather doubtfully. " Yes, I'm almost inclined to think they will ! "

CHAPTER XXVI

TATTERED TOM COMES TO SCHOOL AGAIN

"O, mischief! thou art swift
To enter in the thoughts of desperate men!"
SHAKESPEARE: *Romeo and Juliet.*

HAPPY discussion on the school's two new men, and their possible good effect on the team's combination, was interrupted that night by melodious whistling outside King's, almost below the captain's study window.

"Well I never—a nightingale!" was Wally's involuntary remark.

"Nightingales at this time of year? You're a dud naturalist, Wally!" Blenk scoffed.

"Well, then, it's some artist in whistling—what d'ye call him? A *siffleur*."

"No one should be fooling round the quad at this time o' night," Wilf said. He passed quickly to the window and flung it wide—then shot the light of a pocket-torch into the darkness below. "Why, men, it's Tattered Tom!" he announced. "Stop whistling, Tom—I hear you. What are you doing there?"

"Called to see you, cully," was the cautious answer.

"Me? Well, I wish you'd time your calls better. Is it anything in particular?"

"Yes. Father's drunk again, or I dussn't have come."

"Won't it wait till to-morrow?"

"No!"

"Stay there a few minutes, then—don't make a din." Wilf cautiously shut the window and strode to the door. "I'd better go down to him alone, boys," he said. "Old Shanter will be nosey if anybody else pops out. He won't like to ask questions of me. Beats me how, with those huge gates locked, the gipsy kid got into the quad."

But high gates were no more a bar to the forest-bred boy than tall trees would have been. He softly whistled again as Wilf groped about for him in the pitch blackness of the January night, and then clutched the captain's arm convulsively.

"I mustn't stay more'n a minute or so," he said, "or they'll mebbe miss me from the new camp. We've been thrown out of the one in Bracken Ings."

"When did that happen?"

"Only yisterday. That master o' yourn in the big house yonder—the one with the theayter in it——"

"The Schoolhouse—yes?"

"He got us chucked out, and he's going through it for it. They're getting it up for him."

"For Old Maltkin—Mr. Malt?"

"Yes. I've chanced me own neck by coming here to tell yer. They'd break it if they knowed. Father's drunk—he doesn't know—I can get back afore he wakes. To-morrer, he'll have the temper of a fiend; if the master as had us flung out by the perlice——"

"I see," Wilf whispered back. "Your tribe have had to pack up and quit the school land, and they think Mr. Malt is to blame for it?"

"And so he is! He did it on us, and it ain't fair, 'cos we done him no harm."

"Somebody pinched a tapestry of his, Tom!"

"I know nuffink about that," Tom hastened to say. "I wouldn't have come to tell yer—not for the likes of him—but you and that other big feller took father's whip from him that day, and you scared him stiff—he's never touched me since. But he'll be as mad as a bull to-morrer, when the beer's passed off. Keep out of his way—and tell that master to look out for hisself, too. They're getting it up for him; I've warned yer!"

Having disburdened himself of all that he came to say, Tattered Tom slipped silently off—despite the rigour of the weather, he was barefooted—and Wilf, shivering a little, returned to King's with all speed, throwing a sop to the suspicious janitor by saying: "Thought there was something fishy outside, Shanter, but it's all right—nobody's climbing in or out of windows."

To Wally and Blenk he confided what he had heard, and both agreed that Old Malt should be informed of it before bedtime.

"It may spoil his beauty-sleep," Blenk said, "but that's better than letting him get up before breakfast to take a toddle along the canal bank—as we've seen him do now and again—and run his head right into Gipsy Sim's noose."

"But how can you see him to-night, Wilf?" Wally asked. "Schoolhouse will be bolted and barred."

"I won't try, old lad," Wilf wisely resolved. "The Gunner is the man for that job. I'll let him into the secret and leave him to do the rest."

"I hope they'll not find out that poor little Tattered Tom blew the gaff," Blenk said apprehensively.

"We must take care that they don't," Wilf answered. "Gipsy Sim doesn't deserve to have a bright younker like that at his beck and call."

"Pity Tom can't be taken away from the blackguard, and given a fresh start in life," Wally said.

"Ask Old Maltkin to adopt him!" Blenk suggested, with grim irony.

But Old Maltkin's hatred of gipsies was coupled with profound contempt for their threats. The Gunner returned to Wilf, just on bedtime, with the report that the Schoolhouse master declined to take Tattered Tom's warning seriously.

"All bluster and bunkum—that's Mr. Malt's opinion of it, Gwynn. He says it's good of you to let him know—I have to thank you on his behalf—but his sleep will be undisturbed by bloodcurdling dreams of 'The Gipsy's Warning,' 'The Romany's Revenge,' and all that sort of melodramatic tosh. He's proud of having at last turned the gipsies out, and doesn't care a snap of the fingers for their boastful talk of vengeance."

"That's all right, sir, thank you!" Wilf said. "I'll think no more about it, then."

He felt rather "dropped on," all the same, by Old Malt's scornful treatment of his message, and his face must have reflected his feelings, for the Gunner soothed him somewhat by saying:

"Personally, Gwynn, I think the tribe's threat ought not to be treated too lightly. It may be hot air merely, but, were I in Mr. Malt's shoes, I'd be careful where I walked for a week or two. And that's the studied opinion of an old soldier, my boy, who knows what gipsies can do when roused."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SPY WHO RETURNED TOO LATE

"I go, I go; look how I go;
Swifter than arrow from the Tartar's bow."
SHAKESPEARE: *Midsummer Night's Dream.*

SATURDAY, the thirtieth of January, became the first red-letter day in Wilf's captaincy. It brought Ashwinnin a one-goal victory over Weaponess College, and the all-important shot which decided the issue flew into the net from the toes of the new outside-right, when everybody on the field had given up a fast and exciting game as a goalless draw.

The Wepps had played thrustful football all through, but Wilf, Daddy and Bex had built up a wall of defence which flung them back, and a welcome improvement in the half-back line, steadied now by the cool example of long-legged Darton, had enabled the home forwards to turn the tables at last and give the College rearguard a gruelling time.

Lobby and Howell travelled nippily along the wings, and brisk centres gave the inside men glorious chances, but Wiske, impetuous as usual, and peeved because he had been so long out of the picture, over-ran the ball twice, and thrice missed open goals—failures which Lobson watched with an immovable face, knowing such luck to be all in the game.

He had been centring unselfishly until then, but the last minute saw a change in his tactics which quite

deceived the Weaponess defence. He dribbled close to the corner-flag; then, as the Wepps prepared themselves to rob the inside men of the expected centre, Lobby shot hard and struck the post, from which the ball rebounded into the corner of the net nearest to him—a goal with a spice of luck about it, but one which stamped the new man as a marksman and a strategist.

How eagerly the Skylarks swarmed round him with his overcoats and wraps, which he faddily insisted on resuming the moment play ceased! With what undisguised delight, too, did Wilf and Bex bear down on him to slap his back and wring his hands! His winning goal had wonderfully transformed things for these two head boys; nothing succeeds like success, and the roar of cheering which greeted the victory was like the music of military bands in their ears.

The School had seen its despised Soccer team rise from the embers of defeat to renewed life and hope, and critics stood silent and abashed amid the storm of applause which that sensational last-minute goal evoked.

You may run down a losing side without let or hindrance, because so many share your disgust; but you are in danger of being swamped if you foolishly go against the swim when the tide turns!

So quickly did the news of the victory spread that within half an hour of the finish, the captain of St, Placid's was in Wilf's study, heartily congratulating him on the result.

"We've beaten Ramsdale by four clear goals, old man, so you ought to whack them *now*," Bruce said. with rather naïve emphasis. "All due to your new right-wing flier, wasn't it?"

"Well, not quite all," was Wilf's blithe reply. "The rest of us touched the ball once or twice, you know! The truth is, Bruce, we're knitting together rather well, and if you'll lend us a couple of halves and an inside forward or two—well, we won't let you run us off our feet next time!"

"Oh, March fifteenth is a long way off; you'll have brought some more new stars to light by then, you old sticker! Ferns still alive, I see," Bruce went on, changing the subject. "While I'm here, what's the news of our Mr. Lidgett's case?"

"Oh, fairly good at last. I haven't yet seen him this year, but he wrote me that he'd made two or three big bugs sit up and take notice. One of 'em knows Sir Daniel Deepdale's heir, and is going to talk to him like a father about the thing."

"Then you really needn't trot down to the Peep o' Day Club again, Wilf?"

"'Fraid I must, old lad. He still can't write legibly or use a typewriter, and we musn't spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar."

"I feel mean and cowardly, Wilf, letting you do it all. But the High-master was quite brutally frank—said he'd thought of 'firing' me if I didn't agree to saw off the club. And if Dr. Vollum gets on your track in the same way——"

"He'll never bunk me for it, Bruce, whatever happens," was Wilf's earnest conviction. "And somebody else will very likely be made captain in any event, so who cares? I simply couldn't drop the Lidgett mystery now; it would be like going out of a thrilling play just before the last scene, and missing the best part."

To take his chum's mind off the risks of the affair,

Wilf told him of Tattered Tom's second visit to the school, and Old Maltkin's disdainful reception of the gipsy boy's warning.

"So, as Bracken Ings isn't out of bounds for you, old man, you may yet see a startling occurrence in Gipsy Meadow; Old Maltkin tied to a tree, perhaps, and the whole tribe of Fettos dancing round him like savages, pinning him to the trunk with knives. That'll not be so easy to stop as the horsewhipping was."

"Your housemaster isn't wise to pooh-pooh it," Bruce agreed. "I shouldn't care to meet Gipsy Sim in a dark lane myself. Well, old boy, I must clear now. You're a revengeful sort yourself, you know, always yearning to pay St. Placid's back for that horrible licking last term!"

Wilf had a call to pay at the Whisperdale athletic outfitter's, but he waited until Bruce had gone before setting off. He wanted his journey to cover a visit to the Peep o' Day Club, within which he spent far more time than he gave to the purchase of a new football.

Mr. Lidgett was in an unusually optimistic mood. He entrusted to Wilf a little sheaf of letters, some of which encouraged him to believe that his character would soon be cleared of the undeserved stigma on it.

"Acknowledge these, my boy, with my best thanks —you know how to word it—and it may be the last time I shall have to trouble you. Perhaps I am premature, but I fairly glow with hope to-day."

Wilf carefully pocketed the papers, and had his foot on the bottom step of the club doorway, when he caught a glimpse of a blue-and-gold cap at the bend of the lane. Its owner was running, and the ungainly ait told him that the boy in a hurry was Guyes.

"Ah, I've seen you, Lantern!" Wilf murmured. "Why such haste? To get back to school before me, I suppose? But what to do then? Surely you'll never have the nerve to go straight to the Old Man with information against me?"

But Wilf turned suddenly hot all over as he recollected how easily and safely such information had been laid against Bruce. The High-master of St. Placid's had respected the confidence of the informer. What was to prevent the Head of Ashwinnin from taking the same course if Guyes made a point of it?

The time for the review of the captaincy was nigh; would Lantern's secret communication (if he dared to make one) so anger Dr. Vollum that, failing a convincing explanation, he would appoint a fresh captain immediately?

"If that's likely," Wilf reflected, "I'd better tell *my* tale first. Lantern's got a good start, but he's no sportsman. Can I race and beat him?"

The shortest way was to cut through a corner of Gipsy Meadow, but Wilf was too conscientious a captain to traverse forbidden ground. In order to avoid being seen by Lantern, therefore, he took a wide circuit, noting agreeably, for the first time, how much easier running had become to him since his tremendous exertions at full-back had developed muscle and strengthened his wind.

"Wherever Lantern is, I guess I'm ahead of him now," he said, spurting through the school gates. "Not many fellows about—too dark, luckily."

In Hall he ran against Pennin, whose manner towards him was solemnly and comically deferential. "Oh, I say, Gwynn——" Pennin began.

"Don't stop me just now, Pennin," Wilf impatiently

interrupted. "Haven't time to jaw. Must see the Head upstairs."

"You can't, Gwynn."

"Why not?" Wilf paused on the stairs to ask. "Somebody with him?"

"No. He's down here, in the smoke-room. Saw him go in there about a minute ago."

"Oh, thanks, old man!" How fortunate it was that he had not thrust Pennin aside without a civil word! Had he rushed upstairs, to wander vainly from room to room there, Lantern might have chanced upon Dr. Vollum downstairs and done all the tale-bearing mischief possible.

The Old Man was chatting pleasantly to one of the under-masters when Wilf entered. "Seeking me, Gwynn?" he asked. "Right! We'll go to my study together."

He had instantly divined, from a glance at the boy's face, that something more than the everyday routine of school life was perplexing the captain, and his kind manner invited confidence as he offered Wilf a chair. This was well, for Wilf had no time for beating about the bush. He must tell his story tersely and quickly before Guyes could knock at the door.

"I clearly understand you, Gwynn," the Doctor said, at the close of his unvarnished tale. "In what part of the Peep o' Day Club did you converse with Mr. Lidgett?"

"Always in his private room upstairs, sir."

"You never mixed with the members of the club?"

"Never, sir."

"That is well. All the same, I disagree with my good friend, the High-master of St. Placid's, in taking those Peep o' Day clubmen seriously. Long-haired

highbrows, most of them, of the so-called ' new school of thought '—harmless and amusing day-dreamers."

" Then you wouldn't expel me for going there, sir ? "

" Not I, Gwynn ! " The Old Man was actually laughing as he spoke. " Your quixotry rather entertains me ! An older man would have been more chary of helping an entire stranger—an ex-convict, though an innocent one—in that chivalrous way."

" You believe him innocent, sir ? Oh, I'm so glad ! "

" Being a keen student of human nature, Gwynn, I know, in the first place, that you have acted with perfect sincerity. The Peep o' Day Club is not a public-house ; drink is unobtainable there, and it is not on Ashwinnin's black-list. No schoolboy could attend its high-falutin' lectures without falling asleep—he would scarcely understand a word of them. Why, therefore, should I punish you for visiting a friend there ? I flatter myself I am not so narrow-minded as that."

A feeling of intense relief permeated Wilf's being, and made him flush with pleasure. " How I wish, sir, that I had told you everything sooner ! " he said.

" Never mind ; better late than never. I am the more ready to believe your unfortunate friend's story because—hello, who's there ? " the Old Man broke off, rather irritably. " Come in, please," he added, and in walked Lantern, looking hot and agitated.

" Yes, Guyes—what is it ? "

Lantern's prominent jaw seemed to stretch out to an inordinate length as he saw Wilf sitting quietly beside the fire. Whatever he had come to say was not actually what he *did* say, it being easy to tell that he was making up his flurried speech as he went along.

"Oh, if—if you please, sir, can—can you tell me—will there be any—er—any—er—that is, sir, are there any special prizes, sir—this term, I mean, sir—offered for—for mathematics, sir?"

"Is that all you came to ask me, Guyes?" the Head sharply inquired.

"Y-yes, sir."

"Really all?"

"Indeed, sir, yes."

"Then you are either playing the fool, Guyes, or you are the victim of a brain storm. It has been publicly announced that there will be no more special prizes until the midsummer term. You were present, I know, when the announcement was made, and a notice to the same effect has been on the board for days. So how dare you waste my time with such frivolous questions, sir? Go!"

Lantern backed out in clumsy haste, a disillusioned and heartsick man, with all his ambitions in ruins beneath his feet. Apparently giving him no second thought, the Head at once took up the broken thread of his theme, saying reminiscently:

"I was at school when Sir Daniel Deepdale was in the upper forms, Gwynn, and I am perfectly certain, from what I saw and heard of him then, that he could never have written such books as 'Motives' and 'Under the Surface,' which I found the other day in our own library—hard reading for boys, but presented, I am told, by an anonymous donor. As a commercial man, he could and did succeed; as an author, he must have been a failure if he had not secretly bought the brains of your talented friend, Mr. Lidgett. Therefore, I unreservedly believe that poor Lidgett has suffered a grievous wrong in being imprisoned."

Wilf rose from his chair with a cry of boyish delight. "That is splendid of you, sir," he gratefully said.

"Just ordinary sense and common humanity, Gwynn. Will you write Mr. Lidgett to-night, please—there is still time for the post—asking him to call and see me, at my own house, to-morrow evening?"

"With pleasure, sir!"

"That will do, then—I feel sure I can give him a helpful leg-up. In fact, my boy"—the Old Man laid a firm and friendly hand on Wilf's shoulder—"I think you had better do no more in the matter for the present. Tongues *will* wag, you know! Drop the Peep o' Day Club like a hot potato—leave Mr. Lidgett's case to me—and give your time and energy to Ashwinnin. 'All for School, School for All,' you know!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

A BATTLE WITH THE CYCLOPS

"Thus far our fortune keeps an upward course,
And we are grac'd with wreaths of victory."

SHAKESPEARE: *Henry VI.*

"You football men may or may not have noticed," said Blenk, "in your pardonable glee, that no report of your victory over Weaponess College appeared in the *Shires' Morning Mercury*, though great care was taken to record your failures."

"I never gave it a second thought, Blenk," Wilf admitted.

"No, but I did, old man, and I can now give you the name of the scribe who wrote those rotten reports. It was the author of that inspired lecture 'How to make Maths Easier.'"

"What, Lantern?" Bex incredulously exclaimed.

"Yes, my boy, Lantern—he who first fancied Cyclo as a captain, then thought the captain's cap would match his own spotty—spotless, I mean—complexion better."

"You don't say that Lantern actually had the cheek——"

"Yes, Bex; he *did!* Really thought himself 'born to rule the storm,' so to speak. That's why he slated both Wilf and Wiske in his report of the Weaponess match—considered them his most dangerous rivals for the captaincy, you see."

"It sounds likely enough, Blenk," Bex said, "but where's your proof?"

"I'm not speaking without the book, Bex, because it was between the leaves of a book that I found the proof. Master Guyes borrowed a manual on 'Composition and Style,' kept it weeks longer than he should have done, and only returned it in a great hurry when I reminded him that he was liable to a twopenny fine for every overdue week. I was replacing it on the shelf when a sheet of paper fell out of it, and the scribble's here to be seen. Look at it, you two!"

"But I don't suppose he meant it to be seen," Wilf uneasily demurred. "Ought we to——"

"You *are* a squeamish beggar, Wilf. This is the paper dagger, so to speak, which stabbed you in the back, and you don't like to look at it! If you knew all that I know about Lantern—how he's been following you around for some mouldy reason of his own——"

"I do happen to know that, Blenk, and much good it's done him! But I always thought librarians returned borrowers' papers which had been accidentally left in books."

"Exactly what I mean to do, Wilf, when you and Bex have learnt what's on it. Then Lantern's chin will hit his chest with a thud, and he'll save you the trouble of kicking him by kicking himself. Read it aloud, Bex, there's a good man."

Bex complied, but it was only like re-reading the printed account which they already knew almost by heart. It was Lantern's rough draft of the report he had sent to the *Mercury*. Doubtless he had been using the volume on "Composition and Style" to help him to frame his sentences, and had neglected (as

ultra-smart people often do neglect) to destroy the written evidence of underhand work.

"Proof 'strong as holy writ,' you see," Blenk declared. "Now, Wilf, here's an envelope, addressed to Guyes, with the library's rubber-stamp on the flap. It contains an account rendered for a shilling fine (he would rather be thumbscrewed than pay it) and will also carry back to him the sheet of paper which betrayed him. Won't it give him a shock! Put it in with your own hands, captain. Retribution!"

To humour the sharp-witted librarian, who had so loyally laboured for him throughout, Wilf pushed the draft report into the envelope, thinking that, as Lantern had not seen him do it, the action was of no significance. But Blenk, outside the study, beckoned to his brother, who stole up like a mouse and took the envelope extended to him. Thus it was that Wilf's fag, unknown to him, delivered the letter personally to Lantern, who naturally assumed that it came straight from the captain himself, and went about in fear and trembling for days afterwards, passing the captain's study with ludicrous timidity and inventing all sorts of excuses for spending less of his time in King's than in Schoolhouse, where the chances of encountering Wilf were fewer. And it was all so futile, because Wilf had no intention of punching his head, being too busy to indulge in the luxury of thrashing an opponent whom he thought unworthy of his steel.

Relieved beyond measure to know that Dr. Vollum had enthusiastically taken Mr. Lidgett's case in hand, and heartened by the remembrance of the Head's parting words of encouragement, Wilf threw himself energetically into the school's most pressing affairs,

and had, for the first time, the gratification of starting off with a football team which was cheered as it left the gates—not by a great crowd of well-wishers, but by a gathering that contained more Schoolhouse men than he would have deemed possible in earlier days.

"It's Lobby that's drawn 'em, Bex," he said. "They've got a champion they can cheer at last. No offence to you, old man, as head of the house, but they never came to wave *you* off like this."

"No," Bex smilingly agreed. "Scoring goals catches the eye better than saving 'em, and I'd nine bunged past me the first time I turned out, remember."

"That won't happen again while you're at Ashwinnin, Bex," Howell answered him. "You've a *team* in front of you now!"

"With an idle afternoon before you, too," Cyclo predicted. "All the scoring will be at the other end to-day. I, for one, feel fit to play centre against Scotland, Ireland and Wales combined."

"Good luck, Cyclo, and the hat trick this time!" Wilf laughed.

"Don't feed his vanity, for goodness' sake," whispered Pit-pat, who was accompanying the team as linesman. "It's our friend in the corner there who'll do the scoring if anybody does. Yet see how he shivers!"

Lobby seemed all gooseflesh as he huddled himself up in the motor coach, the swift motion of which sent the wintry air whizzing through the open ventilators.

"Don't see why we should all be frozen into slabs of chilled beef," he grumbled. "What d'ye say to closing these windows?"

Few of them wanted the current of air shut off, but it was eloquent of their respect for the new man

that they did not ridicule his whim. There was an exchange of sly winks, but three of them jumped up at once to close the ventilators, whereupon Lobby sighed with satisfaction.

"Simply couldn't get warm all night," he complained. "Toes like icicles—got cramp through drawing my knees up to my chin. Chilly place, Ashwinnin!"

"They do things better in Russia, Lobby," Bex responded, with an elbow-dig in Wilf's side. "Sleep on the top of the stove there, I believe. Still, you'll soon warm up at Ramsdale. Their left full-back's as big as a haystack, I'm told."

"That'll suit me, then," Lobby was quick to answer. "Haystacks are hot when you set 'em afire, aren't they? I like something to go at!"

And it actually came about that the duel between Lobby and the big full-back was the feature of the afternoon. It looked, for the first half-hour, as if the new man had met his match in Burton primus, the hugest of a trio of brothers, who were called "the three Cyclops" at Ramsdale Grammar School.

Burton secundus played left half-back and Burton tertius was the outside-left, an arrangement which brought all three into forcible contact with Lobby at times. After being surprised at first by two of his tricky runs and centres, they charged him off the ball without mercy, and seemed so to shake him up that he lost confidence for a time. While thus under a cloud, he saw "Cyclops the third" place two perfect corner kicks which resulted in goals, Bex being twice hopelessly beaten from short range.

That was a staggerer for the visiting team in general, even Wilf looking rather sick about it; but on the two new men the unexpected set-back seemed

to act like a tonic. Darton leapt into sudden life at centre-half, and commenced to ply his right wing with forward passes, beautifully timed, while conveniently ignoring Cyclo's urgent request to be given "a smell of the ball." Darton evidently thought Ashwinnin's bread was buttered on the other side, and the result of his tactics in feeding the right wing was a lovely goal from Lobby's foot—one of those shots which, by their force and pace, bring a goalkeeper's heart into his mouth.

"Two-one isn't so bad, after all," Pit-pat remarked in the dressing-room, at half-time. "I've heard some tall talk on the line. The three Cyclops were expected to eat us up, and they'll do it in the next half, I'm told."

"Who cares for their Cyclops?" Daddy Burns said. "Lobby is our Ulysses, and he doesn't intend being gobbled—do you, Lobby?"

Lobby had his lips to a bottle of brown liquid which looked like cough mixture, and was gravely measuring off a prescribed dose with his thumbnail, so that he could not answer. Cyclo therefore snatched the chance to air his grievance.

"Look here, you two new fellows, you aren't the whole cheese, recollect," he grumbled. "What's a centre-forward for, I'd like to know? We'd have been two goals ahead if you'd only fed me."

Darton busied himself in sponging traces of wear and tear from his bony knees and made no sign whatever that he had heard Cyclo's reproach. Lobby certainly spoke, but by no means to the point. Patting his chest, he gratefully said, "There, that's gone straight to the weak spot. Fine stuff, this cinnamon and horehound balsam. Can recommend it to you."

"Try it in your bath," was Howell's chuckling comment.

It was characteristic of Howell that, though he had scarcely had a pass all the afternoon, he bore no malice and harboured no jealousy. He was rewarded in the second half by sharing in an all-round and long-sustained attack on the Ramsdale goal, and it was he who accurately placed the corner from which Cyclo, to his own and the team's boundless delight, headed a simple equaliser.

"He'd only to sneeze at it to blow it through," a disgusted spectator observed, "but you'd think he'd run the length of the field to score. What a gas balloon!"

"Play up, you Cyclops!" other onlookers cried. "We're not dead yet. Bustle 'em, Rams!"

The rallying cry set the home team keenly moving, and in a moment of greatness the youngest of the Cyclops ran brilliantly round Daddy Burns and had the goal at his mercy. But Bex, who had slipped to his knees in the mud—looking hopelessly out of the hunt—recovered himself in time to stop a fine shot dead on the line: then pushed the ball to Wilf, who completed the clearance by darting back and kicking the ball to the ropes.

"'There is a tide in the affairs of men,'" a Grammar School master quoted then, "and we've missed ours, I fear."

It was true enough—they had. If that great shot had crossed the line, a runaway victory for the home team might have been possible, but the throw-in went to Darton, who banged the ball to Howell, and Howell crossed it unselfishly to the other wing, and Lobby, who had been anxiously cooling his heels, made a great

burst to warm himself again, and bored his way daringly between Burton secundus and Burton primus, and was setting himself to shoot for all he was worth when the eldest of the Cyclops jumped on him from behind and kneed him in the spine. Lobby shouted aloud with the pain of it; the referee blew his whistle and pointed to the penalty mark, and a minute later the folly of jumping rudely into people's backs was emphasised by the victim of the foul, who was still boiling with anger when he swished a non-stop shot into the back of the net.

"I was just in the mood for that," he said, in response to their laughing congratulations. "Thanks for letting me take it, Gwynn."

"You can take the next two, and welcome!" Wilf promised him.

But there was no more scoring—just a long bombardment of each goal in turn, with Ramsdale crowding on all sail and Ashwinnin in sore straits when the final whistle blew. Only that last tootle saved their foes, the disappointed Rams declared; but Wilf was sure they could have held out another ten minutes or so, and in any case speculation on the point was idle, because all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot legally stretch out an ordinary football match beyond the time allotted to it.

"Our first win on foreign soil," Bex exultantly declared. "There must be a supper to celebrate it."

"We'll give one, Bex, you and I," Wilf answered. "To-night, eh?"

"Rather!" And they instructed the motor coachman to draw up opposite a good cookshop on the homeward journey, which singing and cheering made a happy and memorable one indeed.

CHAPTER XXIX

ANOTHER AFFRAY IN GIPSY MEADOW

"Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace."
SHAKESPEARE: *Romeo and Juliet.*

THE Schoolhouse master considered himself a benefactor to Ashwinnin. He wrote to Sir Oswald Dyde about his success in reclaiming Gipsy Meadow from the Fetto tribe, and was proud enough of the baronet's grateful reply to suggest framing it and hanging it in the Hall. The Gunner laughed him out of that proposal, however, reminding him that the gipsies had only shifted their encampment a mile further on, and could still make their presence unpleasantly felt if they wished.

"Really, Malt, you ought to procure an invisible cloak for your rambles round Whisperdale," the Gunner half seriously told him. "Our times don't fit, or I'd go with you and share the risk."

"My dear Boon, there's less risk in it than being pricked by a pin," Mr. Malt replied. "I'm no more afraid of these pasteboard villains than if they were singing in the chorus of 'The Beggars' Opera' or 'The Bohemian Girl.'"

"Oh, I don't know; these wandering tribes are more or less barbarians still."

"The Fettos aren't a wandering tribe, Boon—I only wish they were. I'm quite convinced they stole my tapestry, which the wife treasured more than all we

possess. She says the luck of the house went with it; mere feminine superstition, of course, but Schoolhouse hasn't shone in comparison with yours since."

"Oh, yes, it has, Malt. It's provided us with a match-winning footballer, and what is indoor success compared with an honour like that? A bauble!"

Having thus restored his colleague's good humour, the Gunner watched him start on his solitary walk—then turned back into his house with a sigh. "Can't even induce Malt to carry a stick in self-defence," he murmured. "I fear he'll be sorry for his bravado some day."

The Gunner had felt immensely flattered by an invitation to attend the house supper in celebration of the footer team's first "away" victory. He had thought it wiser not to accept, but the invitation had paved the way to franker relations with his prefects, and he decided now, on a sudden impulse, to pay an informal visit to the captain's study.

The unlooked-for honour caused Wilf to flush with pleasure. For half an hour they chatted on matters dear to both; then, with the talk drifting from school affairs to the subject of fern-collecting, the Gunner proposed that they should go for a brisk walk together, saying:

"That will be wiser than drinking tea brewed by your fag, Gwynn. A little bird tells me that he is better at catering for amusement than for the inner man!"

Wilf was glad to stretch his legs in such entertaining company, and still more pleased because he was able to introduce Bruce to the Gunner when they met the captain of St. Placid's near the Abbot's Gateway.

"I've wanted to know you for months, Marchmont,"

the Gunner said; "in fact, ever since you and your hefty team turned our triumphal opening day into a melancholy farce by making hacks of us. Will you join our walk? I wish your housemaster were here too; then we could show Whisperdale that the old and new school rub along perfectly well together."

With none of the restraint which converse with a "beak" is supposed to put on schoolboys, they freely and naturally told him of their mutual interests, finding in him an appreciative listener. Wilf was amusing him by a confidential description of Tattered Tom's appearance among the Mystery Men in the Schoolhouse theatre when the very boy of whom he was speaking forced his way through the hedge and ran up to them in great concern. The cap which Pennin had sent him was awry on his head, giving him a rakish appearance which contrasted oddly with the deadly seriousness of his demeanour.

"I say, cully, did you see which way that—that other master o' yourn went?" he panted. "Him as turned us out o' Gipsy Meadow, I mean?"

"No," said Wilf. "What about it?"

"I'll be skinned alive for tellin' yer, but if he's turned down there"—the gipsy boy pointed dramatically towards Bracken Ings—"he's goin' through it now, or will be very soon."

"How do you mean, Tom?" Bruce asked.

"It's plain enough what he means," said the Gunner, starting to run. "Come along, boys; Mr. Malt's in the cart, I'm afraid. I always thought this would happen."

He led the way to Old Maltkin's familiar haunts, brushing aside Bruce's suggestion that Tattered Tom should be sent to call out the police.

"The youngster would never go," he said; "blood's thicker than water."

The thought that he was expecting a great deal of two boys of seventeen by taking them straight into a position of peril did not occur to him at the time, his dominant desire being to reach Gipsy Meadow before the Fettos could ambush and attack his foolhardy colleague. He obeyed the British instinct of flying to the rescue, irrespective of the odds against him and his youthful companions.

In Gipsy Meadow, as they approached it, all seemed quiet as a graveyard. But that delusive atmosphere of peace lasted for a minute only. From behind a cluster of wild holly trees came the thud of a cudgel and a sharp cry of pain, followed by an outburst of strange, unintelligible language that was like the chattering of monkeys.

The ominous sound badly frightened the boys, who halted for a moment, looking at each other with wide and startled eyes; but the Gunner doubled his speed, leapt over a boggy patch of ground, and passed unhesitatingly through the holly trees, with no better weapons than those with which Nature had provided him.

The captains, temporarily terror-stricken, heard the Gunner's angry shout of "Stop that—get away from him, you brutes," and the clamour that instantly arose proved that he had plunged into the hottest of hot water. Each was conscious of that feeling of nausea which the strongest of people experience when bloodshed lies ahead; they were funky to their fingertips, but could not, for very shame, stand there and do nothing while the two housemasters were surrounded and grievously ill-used.

"We've got to slam into it, Bruce," were the words which Wilf forced his shaking voice to shape.

"I—I suppose so, old man," came the wobbly and unheroic response from the scared captain of St. Placid's.

"Shout your hardest first, Bruce, to put the wind up them."

Keeping together as they made the dreaded plunge, they let off a half-hysterical yell, Wilf shouting "Hi, there!" and Bruce "Help, help!" Then, with the courage which comes of sudden resolution, they parted the prickly holly branches and rushed into the one-sided fray.

"Put your boot into this fellow's body, Gwynn, quick," the hard-breathing Gunner implored him.

It was something which a well-trained full-back could do with promptitude and vigour, and Wilf gladly gave his whole attention to the performance of it. Bellowing with rage as he received a tremendous kick from the rear, the big gipsy paused in his murderous attempt to fasten a choking grip on the Gunner's throat, and in a trice the Gunner took the chance to strike him full between the eyes, felling him neatly and effectively, for he remained where he had dropped, nursing his head and groaning.

"Capital, Gwynn," the Gunner panted. "Land out, you two, with your feet, anywhere you can, and keep on yelling for help."

While instructing them thus, the amazing Gunner was himself hitting out right and left, his plain object being to fight his way to the aid of Old Maltkin, over whose inanimate figure Gipsy Sim was stooping.

Homicidal mania seemed to have fired the blood of the gipsy king's son. His dark face was distorted

with vengeful fury as he crashed his cudgel into the hunched-up shoulders of the Schoolhouse master, whose head, fortunately for him, was shielded by a bush, under which he had probably tried to crawl when first beaten to the ground.

Two younger gipsies held back the Gunner for a few seconds, but his rage gave him a strength which turned aside their blows and sent them sprawling, and before they could renew the attack he fell on Gipsy Sim and struck him twice. Stunned, the tribe's leader swayed a little and dropped his cudgel, and the Gunner, who had seen too much hard fighting abroad to stand on ceremony at home, snatched up the weapon and smote Gipsy Sim on the head with it. Having thus put the chief out of action, he turned back to rush to the aid of Wilf and Bruce, on whom three of the other gipsies were just making an ugly attack.

But succour came sooner from another quarter, Mr. Lidgett slipping quickly and quietly between the holly trees and levelling something in his outstretched right hand at the surprised gipsies.

"Down sticks, you curs, or I'll shoot!" he cried.

It was a bold and amazing ruse, which the boys thought too transparent to succeed, for they were near enough to see that the supposed revolver was merely a piece of charred wood, picked from the ashes of a fire which the gipsies themselves had left. But the realism he threw into the action of covering them with the "weapon" frightened the gang, already shaken by the unexpected opposition of the Gunner and the boys. They cowered before this new adversary and backed away, staying just long enough to thump and shake into motion the two men whom the Gunner had knocked out. The air was sweetened by their panic-

stricken departure, which gave unspeakable relief to all four, and to the boys in particular. The last of the gipsies had cleared off when a policeman and half a dozen sturdy woodmen appeared on the scene in response to the cries for help.

"Chase them, constable, please—take these men with you and arrest Gipsy Sim," the Gunner said.

"Arrest him, sir?" the constable doubtfully queried.

"Yes. He is groggy from a crack on the skull, and can't have gone far."

"Well, sir, he's a dangerous character, and afore I foller him I should like to know——"

"Oh, come, man, don't hang about!" the Gunner impatiently cried. "He has beaten my poor friend insensible; your own eyes can tell you that."

"Yes, indeed—it might be a manslaughter case for you," Mr. Lidgett added severely. "Hurry after them. Will two of you others stay behind, though, and help us to carry this gentleman home?"

Mr. Malt stirred and moaned as they tried to raise him without hurting his bruised shoulders. He was bleeding from a wound on the nape of the neck, but smiled up at the anxious faces of those who stooped to lift him. "All serene!" he said. "There's life—in the old dog—yet. Let me walk, please."

Wilf had used his cap to scoop up water from a pool near by, and when they had bathed the injured man's forehead and tied a clean white handkerchief on his wound, he resolutely refused to be carried a step.

"I don't quite gather what's happened to me," he said, "but you men wouldn't be making all this fuss for nothing. Why, you're bleeding, Boon! And

Gwynn's been in the wars, too. It's all so queer. I—I don't understand ; I—I——"

Giddiness seized him then and he again lost consciousness, and it was in the milk float of a local farmer that he reached the doors of Ashwinnin Sanatorium in the end.

CHAPTER XXX

TATTERED TOM ESCAPES TORMENT

"When I am cold, he heats me with beating; when I am warm, he cools me with beating; I am wak'd with it when I sleep; driven out of doors with it; welcomed home with it when I return."

SHAKESPEARE: *Comedy of Errors.*

THE Peep o' Day Club sheltered yet another outcast the next day. It allowed Mr. Lidgett to bring in Tattered Tom, whom he found wandering in the woods, Tom having spent the night there in a snowstorm, afraid to return to the encampment because he had seen his father arrested and taken (struggling, kicking, and biting) to the police station, and dreaded the wrath of the tribe if they suspected for a moment that he had delivered them into the enemy's hands.

"Don't worry, my lad," Mr. Lidgett kindly said. "You're as right as rain here. I've a fellow feeling for you, after being badly treated myself."

"Horsewhipped, sir?" Tom wonderingly asked, with his small face half hidden behind a mug of cocoa.

"No, stung by scorpions, youngster! Not the sort of vipers you see in the woods sometimes—mine were deadlier than those. But I won't interrupt your breakfast by putting riddles to you. Have another rasher of bacon. And could you eat this other egg? I'm not hungry enough to tackle it."

Half a dozen such eggs would not have inconvenienced the ill-fed gipsy boy, whose diet of poached

rabbit had become monotonous. The author took chuckling delight in refilling his plate, there being much in the boy's nature which he found interesting and likeable.

"Don't fret yourself about having given your tribe's plan away, Tom," he said. "You probably saved your father from committing murder. A few months in jail may cure him of his bad habit of knocking people about. You have had many beatings from him in your time, I suppose?"

"I couldn't count 'em, sir. It used to be every day."

"Poor lad! Is your mother in the camp?"

"No, sir. I don't remember her. They say she is dead."

"In that case, there's no hurry about your going back. Will you stay here for a few days?"

"Oh, yes, sir, but——"

"You think you won't really be wanted here? That isn't so at all. I've a friend in the club who wishes to make a few sketches of you. You happen to be the sort of wild young shaver he needs for a sketch-book he is preparing, so you'll be earning your bed and board by sitting to him for a few minutes daily. Are you game to take the job on?"

The hungry boy's mouth was too full to permit of a clear answer just then, but his shining eyes showed how greatly he valued his good luck, and Mr. Lidgett secretly resolved that, if his own affairs prospered, this bright and picturesque-looking lad should not return to the hardships and cruelties of camp life. Tom could earn bread and butter as an artist's model alone; painters of repute would be glad to include so typical a figure in their rural pictures.

"His talent as a mimic might also gain him a place in some troupe of entertainers," Mr. Lidgett reflected. "Gwynn did not exaggerate, I'm sure, in describing his performance at the school as marvellous. He would need no expensive training—the birds and the animals taught him all he knows."

That was an eventful morning for Tattered Tom, but a still more thrilling afternoon awaited the kind-hearted host, who was summoned to Ashwinnin in hot haste, to find a message of good hope awaiting him in Dr. Vollum's study.

"Great news, Mr. Lidgett!" the Head cried. "Sir Daniel Deepdale's spendthrift nephew has got into low water at last and been obliged to sell his London house. Our good friend, Dr. Basil Kneeshaw, spotted the bargain at once, and secured it by paying cash down for it. He will enter into possession immediately, and that may have an important bearing on your case."

"I feel sure it will, sir—thank you so much for quickening Dr. Kneeshaw's interest in it."

"As a man of wealth, Dr. Kneeshaw can afford to indulge his passion for helping those wrongly accused of crime. His plan, I know, is to have a consulting-room in the house; but he has promised to search the place first for secret panels, in which Sir Daniel Deepdale may have concealed the manuscripts of the stories you wrote for him. It is one of London's oldest houses; why should not such hiding-places be found in it?"

"Why not, indeed, sir? I shall be a restless man indeed until I hear the result of the search. What a fortunate day it was when I made the acquaintance of those two dear boys, Gwynn and Marchmont! Gwynn especially has won my heart, Doctor; you

showed unerring instinct when you chose him as captain of the school."

"I wish everybody agreed with you there, my friend! The lad has had to fight for his place against a lot of prejudice."

"But he's kept a stiff upper lip all the time, I'm sure. If you have a franker, merrier, steadier, kinder lad to supplant him, Doctor, you are an exceedingly fortunate headmaster."

"You are seeking to influence me, Mr. Lidgett," the Head laughed, "and I must not view the boy through your rose-coloured spectacles. He has his faults, including a certain reserve of manner which piques some of the seniors. Also, his choice of a chum from a rival school gives offence to some, while others accuse him of conspiring to force on them a game they cannot play. A headmaster must swim cautiously among such cross-currents if he wants to reach a haven of peace, you know!"

"You will fearlessly do the fair thing, sir, whatever it is," the younger man replied, with flattering deference. "If I had only been as firm a writer as you are a schoolmaster, I might have been famous now."

"You *will* be famous, Mr. Lidgett, in time, because your books have the right stuff in them. Get your name cleared and go ahead."

"I will, sir; and if you find your good self and your sturdy young captain included in my first novel, you needn't be very much surprised."

"I should feel proud of it, Mr. Lidgett, although I and my head boy would probably fail to recognise ourselves!"

They went next to the Sanatorium, wherein the

Schoolhouse master, propped up by pillows, was absorbed in "Under the Surface."

"I recommended that and 'Motives' to him to conjure away his troubles," Dr. Vollum explained. "Here's the real author of it, Malt, wishing to know how you feel."

"Sore, but happy, thanks," Old Maltkin smilingly answered.

"Your shoulders must ache," the novelist said.

"Not more than my ribs did when they told me how you held up the gipsies with a piece of charred wood, Mr. Lidgett. I find nothing so melodramatic in your ripping books!"

"It was sheer bluff, Mr. Malt, copied from picture-plays," the novelist confessed. "The gipsies were daft creatures not to see through it instantly. My hand shook like a leaf all the time! Before I tried the dodge on them, though, Mr. Boon and the boys had done you a much better turn. It was fine to see those two strong lads hitting and kicking out. They drew off the rank and file while Mr. Boon toppled over the chief, who was oblivious of everybody but you!"

"I owe you all a big debt of gratitude," Old Maltkin admitted, becoming grave again—"yes, even including the little gipsy boy who betrayed his own father to send help to me. I learn that it was his way of repaying Gwynn and Marchmont for saving him from a paternal horsewhipping once, but it's made me think less harshly of the gipsies. One of them, at least, is true blue—the little one."

The novelist then spoke of his desire to transfer Tattered Tom to a happier sphere of life, and the masters both expressed willingness to join in the scheme.

"But you can't kidnap him, you know," Dr. Vollum

said. "Terms will have to be made with Gipsy Sim when he comes out of prison, where the magistrates are sure to send him."

"I think I can arrange that," the novelist confidently said. "It isn't certain that Gipsy Sim really is the boy's father. There is no sort of resemblance, physical or mental, between them."

"In that case he'll come in cheaper," Dr. Vollum chuckled. "But don't be surprised if he returns to type, Mr. Lidgett, and you find him, some frosty morning, encamped under an umbrella on the lawn, having first snared and cooked your neighbour's pet rabbit."

"I believe, sir, with Mr. Lidgett, that the boy is no gipsy at all," Old Malt said, when they had finished laughing at the Doctor's drollery. "Probably he was stolen from somebody's back garden."

"Like your tapestry, Malt!"

"Yes, sir, that's my meaning. The lad has civilised instincts and a strange sort of refinement—so Gwynn tells me—and Gwynn has an almost uncanny way of sizing people up. In fact, sir, you can rely on Gwynn's word. There isn't a brighter, kinder, straighter boy in the school than he."

The Head looked from one man to the other in quick suspicion. "Almost the very words *you* used of Gwynn, Mr. Lidgett!" he cried. "Is this a conspiracy? Have you joined voices to sing the captain's praises?"

They both smilingly denied it.

"Impossible, sir—a mere coincidence," Old Malt said. "This is the first time I have spoken—consciously, at any rate—to our author friend. As master of a rival house, I did Gwynn the barest justice in speaking well of him."

" I know that, Malt," the Head said. " Pardon me if I seemed to speak sharply, but just now I am rather like a perplexed judge, who resents being told to which side he should lean. I've to make up my mind about the captaincy this week, and it's not a simple task—honestly, Malt, I'd shuffle it on to you and Boon if I could."

" I'm glad you can't, sir," the Schoolhouse master sincerely said.

" There are so many pros and cons to weigh up, and the balance may be fine," Dr. Vollum continued. " In fact, Malt, your job of clearing out the gipsies was child's play to it. They've gone and you've finished ; whereas I have still to appoint Ashwinnin's captain for the year, and getting better of a broken head would be easier than that, I verily believe ! "

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DOGS OF WAR LET SLIP

"O pounding heart,
Baffled, confused,
Heart panged, head singing, dizzily pained."
ROBERT NICHOLS: *The Assault.*

GIPSY SIM'S whining plea of provocation availed him nothing when he appeared before the magistrates. They rightly concluded that a man who strikes an unprotected pedestrian down, and then beats his shoulders almost to pulp as he lies unconscious, is a dangerous person to be at large, and committed him to the assizes, while plainly showing their regret that other members of the tribe had not also been laid by the heels.

Tattered Tom remained under Mr. Lidgett's protection, and was quite an object of interest to the Ashes, who knew him now as the "star turn" of the Mystery performance. His part in the rescue of Pennin had been reported by Penny himself, and Old Maltkin had made him still more of a hero in the school's eyes by telling of his pluck in risking the tribe's anger by revealing their revengeful plans.

Lantern was miserably unsettled in consequence. He had all along made out that the Peep o' Day Club was the resort of thieves and would-be murderers, and that the man whom Wilf went to see was a crime-steeped villain; yet to-day that very man came openly to the school to visit its three principal masters!

To persist in running Wilf down after that would have been preposterous folly. Lantern knew himself to be discredited, and experienced all the bitter self-reproach of a man who has staked everything on a single throw and lost it.

Nobody wanted him now; his clique had disbanded, and those whom his delusive lecture on "making maths easier" had lured into a mathematical bog looked upon him with distrustful scorn.

"Don't ask Lantern to help you with it—he'll put you in the soup," became a stereotyped warning to brain-benumbed dunces; and Lantern's almost abject efforts to worm himself back into favour were everywhere repulsed with unconcealed contempt.

"After all I've done for you, Harry, to treat me like this!" he at last humbled himself to say to Wiske.

"Done for me!" Cyclo indignantly repeated. "Yes, you *have* done for me, or thereabouts. The fellows have found you out a fraud, and they're trying to tar me with the same brush. I wish I'd stuffed the blackboard duster into your great mouth when you first pretended to take my part, Guyes."

"Pretended, Harry!"

"That's what I said—pretended. Do you think I'm a loony, as blind as a bat, not to see you were playing for your own hand all the time?"

"I wasn't!"

"Well, not at first, perhaps, but ever since I'd have nothing to do with that rotten egg of yours—Gwynn and the Peep o' Day Club, I mean. I suppose you thought I should make you my right-hand man when I became captain. But I shan't."

"Well, Wiske, you're not half the last word in con-

ceit ! Do you still really fancy that you'll be captain here ? "

" I do, certainly."

" Then," said Lantern, letting loose the pent-up chagrin and misery of weeks, " you're the swankiest swanker of all the swanks ! You're the silliest ass that ever tried to nibble wooden carrots ! You're a kid's penny squeaker, blown up till it can't help bursting with a bang. You're the most lifty, chesty bounder that ever missed being in a madhouse ; the softest sort of toffee-stick baby that ever its mother forgot to spank——"

He would never have got so far as this if Cyclo had not been so completely taken aback by the unexpected virulence of the tirade. Nobody—not even Wally—had dared to address him before in terms of such insulting plainness. It shocked and shook him to the core, passing like a stiletto through his usually insensitive skin.

The rage of pierced pride possessed him ; forgetful of time and place, he went for Lantern with both fists, intending to knock him off his feet in one magnificently spectacular onslaught. But Lantern put up a fight as bitterly furious as his words had been, returning blow for blow in a white heat of passion which matched his assailant's and did quite as much material damage. Both began bleeding freely as they hammered away at each other, without mercy and without thought of rules.

The quarrel had sprung up with the suddenness of a desert sandstorm, and only a few juniors saw the commencement of it. But in such a public place, almost in the centre of the square which divided King's from the Schoolhouse, it inevitably attracted as much

attention as a dog fight in a busy thoroughfare, and the infuriated antagonists were soon banging each other about in the midst of an excited crowd, none of whom seemed to care twopence which man won, so little had either combatant endeared himself to the school.

It is proverbially said that those in authority are seldom at hand when a row takes place, and on this occasion it seemed true that masters and prefects were the only people who saw nothing of the unedifying scene.

The fight could not have lasted long in any case, Wiske being manifestly the superior pugilist, fitter and harder than his lantern-jawed opponent, whose sustaining whirlwind of passion alone made him indifferent to severe cuts and bruises.

But victory was denied to Wiske by the astonishing conduct of the two new men, Lobson and Darton, who calmly took it upon themselves to cleave a way through the crowd and push obstructive arms between the angry adversaries. Lobby showed how weak Lantern had grown by sweeping him back with ease, and Darton caught and held Wiske's wrists in a grip which Cyclo was not fresh enough to shake off, despite all his wrathful struggles to free himself. The centre-half held the centre-forward captive until he saw that Guyes had wisely slipped away ; then he released his hold, saying coolly :

" Time, Wiske ! I'm referee to-day."

Cyclo calmed down at once, and even tried to laugh a little, though a cut lip stopped him short at a wry smile.

" I say, we weren't half going it, were we ? " he ruefully said. " Guyes gave me some cheek——"

"I notice you've got more than your share," croaked Lobby, in his husky outdoor voice, as the cold breeze set him shivering again.

"Swollen, is it? I guess I look rather a mess. He lashed out harder than I expected. Perhaps it was as well you two new men shoved in; I should have put him to sleep in another five seconds, and there'd have been doctoring to do."

"Couldn't you have scrapped in a more prominent place than this? The classroom during a history lesson, say—period, the battle of Waterloo?" Lobby drawled, in his slow, sarcastic style.

"Oh, well, skit as you like—it's all over now," replied Cyclo, once more good-tempered. "Any one seen the beaks about? Nobody, I hope."

"Oh, yes, Wiske—I have," the piping voice of Booker minimus declared, from the edge of the dwindling crowd.

"Eh, what's that, younker?" Wiske demanded, in trepidation. "Seen a beak, do you say?"

"Yes, Wiske."

"You're dreaming!"

"No, Wiske. I saw him. He was looking through a Schoolhouse window just when—no, just after—no, just before Lobson and Darton pulled you off Lantern, Cyclo—Wiske, I mean."

"Nonsense, young 'un—rats to that tale. You're making it up as you go along."

"I'm not, honest injun. He looked out, I tell you."

"Who did—Old Sheep?"

"No, Volley."

"The Old Man? Never!"

"Oh, yes, he did; peeped through like this and then bobbed away like that"—Booker minimus reproduced

the two actions with comical gravity—" and he seemed in a rare old bait, too."

Cyclo, with his blood-streaked and blackened face, looked foolish enough for a nigger comedian then. " Oh, come, nipper, you must have been mistaken," he urged. " Own up that you've got the whole thing mixed. It wasn't the Old Man; he never squints through windows in that measly way, does he, you men ? "

" I don't care—I saw him, I tell you," Booker minimus insisted. " I nudged you and pointed to the window, didn't I, Blenkie ? "

" Yes, but he'd gone then," Blenkie hastened to say.

" Pooh ! Anybody with eye-glasses on is a beak to a nipper," Cyclo scoffed. " Go and play with your whip and top, Booker minimus, till nursie calls you in to bed."

But Cyclo was putting a braver front on it than his feelings warranted. He was inwardly scolding himself for his rashness in striking Lantern in the open square, and conscious of a depressing fear that Booker minimus really had seen the Head peeping through a Schoolhouse window. If the Old Man had witnessed the fight, or only the last phase of it, it was difficult to think that he would condone such a flagrant offence against the school's regulations.

" And that means that I've simply thrown away the captain's cap in the last lap," Cyclo dolefully reflected. " I almost begin to think that I must have a streak of daftness in me somewhere, after all."

Which was a conclusion Cyclo might have reached, to his own ultimate betterment, quite a number of months earlier !

CHAPTER XXXII

BEX AIDS THE DOCTOR'S CHOICE

"Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide."
JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL: *Present Crisis.*

BEXON'S heart fluttered as he stepped nervously into Dr. Vollum's study. His natural assumption was that the Head was about to reopen the subject of the captaincy, and the greeting he received proved his inference correct.

"Ah, Bexon, I am glad you have come so promptly. Being yourself quick to obey, you are sure to expect obedience in others. Have you enjoyed being head prefect of Schoolhouse?"

"On the whole, sir, yes, thank you," Bex truthfully answered.

"That is well. Do you consider that Gwynn has been quite so happy in King's House?"

Bex relished this question still less. He would have liked more time to think out what it meant, but was compelled to make a shot at the sort of answer which the Head wished to hear.

"Gwynn didn't quite hit it off at first, sir, but—but he's all right there now."

"You think King's House likes him more than it did?"

"Yes, sir, a good deal."

"And Schoolhouse?"

Bex hesitated. Embarrassment was spreading its prickly heat over his face and body. He felt as martyrs doubtless used to feel when inquisition was added to the torments of a hair shirt.

He could not declare that Schoolhouse were now contented with Gwynn's captaincy, yet it might be fair to say, paradoxically, that they were less discontented with it. The change was too subtle to permit of positive assertion, and what Schoolhouse really thought of matters this term would have needed the skill of a mind-reader to detect.

"Well, sir, it's difficult to speak for Schoolhouse," he slowly replied. "They were ratty with—blamed Gwynn, I mean, sir, because we had to play Soccer instead of Rugger——"

"That wasn't at all his fault, Bexon."

"No, sir, but you can't argue with some men. It never bothered Gwynn, sir—at least, he didn't let them see it did, though of course it did a bit, sir—perhaps rather a lot at one time, but he sort of let things slide and—and carried on."

If the Doctor noticed that this shy speech contained a sprinkling of Irish "bulls" he very tactfully repressed his amusement, concerning himself only with its sincerity of purpose.

"In short, Bexon, you think Gwynn the right man in the right place?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that it would not be wise to replace him by any other boy?"

"It would not, sir."

"I am pleased to hear you put such emphasis on it, because, in considering the captaincy, I have been wavering for some weeks between you and Gwynn."

"Between me and him, sir? Why, you—you shouldn't have done. He's the better man by miles, sir—streets ahead of me. Oh, I couldn't think—no. sir, I wouldn't take his place; I—I haven't the—er—gift for it, sir. I should lose my temper and—and kick some one, which old Wilf—Gwynn, I mean—never does."

The Old Man could no longer repress a chuckle. "Thank you, Bexon, for all that," he said. "It lightens my task greatly. Now I'm going to put to you the point-blank question which was in my mind when you entered, and I wish your answer to be a plain one." He paused for a moment to search the flushed boy's face; then asked, "Bexon, will you be captain of Ashwinnin this year?"

"No, sir!"

"Good! A straight answer, Bexon."

"I—I should have said 'No, thank you, sir.'" Bex was flung deeper into confusion as he remembered this important omission.

"The thanks are mainly due from me, Bexon. All of us need some one, at times, to help us to make up our minds, and my way is clear now. Stay where you are in Schoolhouse, my boy, and go on helping Gwynn all you can. He will continue to be captain of the school."

CHAPTER XXXIII

A SHOCK FOR CYCLO

"Oh! that a dream so sweet, so long enjoy'd,
Should be so sadly, cruelly destroy'd!"

MOORE: *Lalla Rookh.*

ASPIRANTS for House honours had grown somewhat weary of watching the notice board in Hall, and the Head's promised announcement, pinned up by some person unknown, passed unobserved until the first supper bell rang.

Then hunger was forgotten as the Ashes swarmed round the board like a crowd of voters scanning the result of an election. There was cheering and booing and not a little scuffling, some fellows thumping others in the back from sheer delight, others from disgust and chagrin. It might have been the declaration of a poll on which the fate of a Government depended, so freely were Ashwinnin's emotions given play.

"Gwynn again! Oh, what a 'go,'" said Paddock; and for that expression of opinion, harmless in words but offensive in tone, he lost collar, tie and stud, plus a certain amount of skin, all torn from him by men who resented his implied aspersion on the captain.

Some partisan, unidentified in the seething excitement, retaliated by ripping Pennin's coat almost from tail to collar, obviously because Penny's wild cheering deafened and annoyed him; while another dissatisfied young mortal employed a fountain pen filler to aim a jet of scarlet ink (easily accessible in Hall) at

the notice board, hoping thereby to achieve dangerous notoriety by obliterating the Head's announcement, but merely succeeding in spraying red drops over the foremost Ashes, few of whom were aware of the disfigurement till afterwards.

Trifles such as that barely counted in the general upheaval, to which the authorities, wise in their generation, turned a blind eye and a deaf ear. There are times when it is better to let mob law work out its own rough salvation.

It will be essential to set out in full the notice which caused such a hubbub, as no clear idea of its contents could be obtained from those who read it out amid the pandemonium of cheers and groans. The words which the projector of scarlet ink failed to obliterate were these :—

ASHWINNIN APPOINTMENTS.

Captain of School and Games	W. Gwynn.
Head Prefect of Schoolhouse	T. A. Bexon.
Schoolhouse Prefects	M. MacAllister. Fell major. L. H. B. Lobson.
King's House Prefects	A. F. C. Burns. R. Walworth. O. P. Darton.

(*Signed*) Colin Vollum,
Headmaster.

The announcement was a blinding flash of revelation to Harry Wiske, showing him his comparative little-

ness in the eyes of Ashwinnin's supreme authority, and in itself it was quite hard enough to bear without the added mortification which somebody contrived to put on him while he metaphorically reeled beneath the blow to his self-esteem.

One of those paper carriers which fruiterers and greengrocers give away, and which had palpably been used for the transport of onions, was suddenly slapped over his head and drawn tight, and in this suffocating sort of bonnet he was thrown to the floor and rolled to and fro by tormentors he could not see, and in circumstances which prevented the employment of his arms to free his muzzled mouth.

This sudden descent from ambition's dizzy heights to humiliation's depths caused him unspeakable anguish. Revenge was impossible, as the second supper bell caused a stampede from Hall, and when he had torn the paper extinguisher from his head he was practically alone, and had to sprint hard to reach King's House before Shanter, waiting sulkily for stragglers, banged and locked the door.

He tried to look loftily detached and unconcerned throughout supper-time, though there was a subdued buzz of comment on the unexpected appointment of Lobson and Darton in the places of Summerscales and Leatham respectively.

"That proves Booker minimus was right when he said he saw the Old Man looking through a Schoolhouse window," Blenkie said to those around him, in something of a stage whisper, audible to Cyclo and other seniors.

"Why does it?" asked Attick, never willing to consider Blenkie a small school oracle.

"Why, you sawny, weren't Lobby and Dart the two

fellows who separated Wiske and Guyes? And the Old Man simply couldn't help saying, 'there's a pair of 'pres.' for you—two men who can stop giddy goats from butting one another's silly heads off!' That saved him the beastly bore of tanning Cyclo and Lantern; their thick hides would send stings up his caning arm, you know, like cracked cricket-bats do."

Never before had Cyclo longed so much for a prefect's privileges. It would have given him savage joy to lay a stick across Blenkin mi.'s back, but he could only make a poor pretence of not having heard the audacious youngster's remarks, while biting his lip and tongue almost as often as he chewed the cake and cheese with which he tried to console himself.

"This is a school where they don't know a good man from a daddy longlegs or a shivering jelly fish," he let himself say at last to Dodsworth major and McColl, his only sympathisers now. He meant to describe Darton and Lobson by these choice comparisons. "If it weren't too late to start again, I'd go over to St. Placid's and play centre-forward for them."

Poor, self-deluded Cyclo, seemingly doomed to be blinded for ever by his own incurable conceit!

"As if Bruce Marchmont would step aside for *him*," Dods whispered to McColl. "He really is a hopeless windbag. Shove your chair further along, Mac, nearer to Darton, who'll be a jolly sight more useful man to get thick with."

Thus do rats desert a sinking ship, and so do friendships which are founded on self-interest crumble to dust in the hour of trial!

CHAPTER XXXIV

ROUGHING IT

"O, it is excellent
To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant."

SHAKESPEARE: *Measure for Measure.*

RAMSDALE came to Ashwinnin in determined mood, bent on bagging a few goals, but were sent empty away.

Constant practice together, blended with a mutual understanding of each other's strong and weak points, had made Bex, Daddy and Wilf a defence difficult to pierce. Either Wilf or Bex—whichever was nearest—would dash in to Daddy's help when he was beaten for pace, and Daddy returned the kindness by taking the goal kicks, thereby saving them for more skilful work at close quarters. The length and power of his careful kicking increased with every match, and those Ashes who had begun by jeering at his scarecrow-like woodenness now laughed triumphantly whenever Daddy sent the ball sailing up or down the field.

"Nearly as good as a free kick every time he boots it," Dennison said. "Strode, old man, you were a bit of an ass, after all, to let Daddy get his toes in."

"Faugh! Such an elephant wouldn't stand a ghost of a show at Rugger," Strode replied.

"Very likely not, but we can't have Rugger, so what's the use of sulking?"

" 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do,' " Lorimer quoted.

" We're cutting off our noses to spite our faces, seems to me," Castle grumbled.

These were the three men on whom Strode relied most for support in his Rugger schemes, and he sighed mournfully as he realised how far they had drifted away from him in the flood tide of Soccer's success. He had given himself the jumps by mooning about elsewhere while all Ashwinnin trooped to the football field—now, for the sake of companionship, he had lined up with the rest, and was trying to fight down an ignoble desire to see the visiting team win—" just to take Gwynn's number down," was the reason he advanced for his disloyalty.

Talkative Ramsdale supporters told wonderful tales of the preparations which the Cyclops had made.

Those three enthusiastic brothers had, it seemed, gone into special training for the match. They had consumed pounds of nearly raw steak, stealthily provided for them by an indulgent and sport-loving chef, and swallowed dozens of raw eggs flavoured with mustard, pepper, salt and vinegar.

They had risen with the lark to do physical jerks in the snow, run countless miles across country, and tried vainly to induce other members of the team to shun tuckshop delights and live sweet-cakeless days—all this with the laudable ambition of proving to the world that Ashwinnin's victory at Ramsdale was merely a flash in the pan, the brightness of which would shortly be obscured by a sweeping defeat on their own ground.

" Tiger-meat has made them fierce," Blenk remarked to a Ramsdale spectator.

"Do they bite when they're like that, or only kick and scratch?" Wally blandly asked.

"You don't know the Cyclops yet," the Ramsdale youth answered. "They're clean players."

"Oh, in one sense, yes," Blenk purred. "I hear that they've been taking Turkish baths this week."

"Only Burton tertius did that. He'd been overfeeding when we played you before, so he took a Turkish or two to get his fat down and his speed up. Look at him galloping now! You haven't a man to touch him."

Appearances were deceptive there. The youngest of the Cyclops frequently got away on his wing and could race past Daddy to the line; but he could not stop himself in time to control the lively ball, and dazzling runs which result only in goal-kicks become as insipid as aerated cider when the sparkle has gone off.

"Trained himself rather too fine, hasn't he?" Blenk observed.

"Must have tried the wrong sort of Turkish delight —bath, I mean," Wally teased the Ramsdale spectators by saying.

"Perhaps they left the geyser on too long and filled his system with bubbles," Blenk took malicious delight in adding. "That would account for his bursts."

The Ramsdale men's replies to this exasperating chaff were lost in a chorus of indignant protests as Burton secundus and primus took rough steps to stop a dangerous spurt by Lobby.

Old Sheep was refereeing, and he promptly awarded the free kick for which the Ashes appealed. "I don't want to overwork the whistle, so keep cool, men," was

his quiet hint to the Cyclops, who might have heeded the advice more if Lobby hadn't astonished them by scoring direct from the free kick. This sudden reversal of the run of the play jarred their nerves and jagged their tempers, and they proceeded to use height, weight, and strength in a manner which upset players, spectators, and referee alike. Lobby was oftener on the ground than on his feet, and Meredith, the lightly-built inside-right, only escaped similar maltreatment by frankly keeping out of the brothers' way.

"I dislike having to warn you Burtons again, but you'll be hurting somebody at this rate," Old Sheep told them. "Play the game, boys."

They simmered down after that, only to boil up again about twenty minutes from time, when Wiske scored the second and last goal in a way that maddened them.

Wilf had had a heart-to-heart talk with Cyclo at half-time, quietly but firmly informing him that he would have to conquer his selfishness or be removed from the team in future. "You don't pass half often enough to your wing men, Cyclo, and it won't do," Wilf said. "Get it out of your head that you're the only marksman in the team—we have even a better one now."

The plain threat to drop him scared Cyclo and did him a good turn. Opening out the play more, he was repaid by the receipt of some fine passes from the wings, and he used one of these to make the goal which annoyed the Cyclops so.

Somehow or other he caught and held the ball between his knees, hopping ludicrously on with it instead of letting it fall, perhaps because he felt himself slipping on the greasy turf and could retain

possession in no other way. But it wasn't to be expected that Burton primus would stand still and watch such unorthodox football. He tried to dislodge the ball from Cyclo's knee-grip by unceremoniously kicking at it, but in his eagerness he stumbled as he kicked, missing his object and booting his opponent on the thigh instead. Then he, too, felt the earth slipping from under him, and fell against Cyclo with all his weight, forcing the centre-forward into the arms of the astonished goalkeeper, who in turn went down with Wiske on the top of him. And among the three of them, without knowing it, they sent the ball over the goal-line, Cyclo's heel being the last to touch it as he rolled over out of the way of the custodian's plunging legs.

It was one of those rough-and-tumble jumbles which may happen six times or more in a keen, no quarter-giving game, but rarely with such unhappy consequences for a defending side as in this instance. It counted as a freakish but unmistakable goal.

A more punctilious referee might have spoilt sport by stopping the game and throwing up the ball, but Old Sheep always used the whistle sparingly, and saw no reason for punishing his own side by interfering just then. Therefore did the Ashes laugh and cheer—laughing indeed more than they cheered—despite the fact that Cyclo emerged limping from his flounder in the goal space and could do little more than hobble through the remainder of the play.

By his cheerful bearing then, with acute pain to handicap him, Cyclo made more genuine friends in a few moments than he had previously numbered in as many months. He even won the respect of the three Cyclops when a dressing-room examination revealed

an ugly swelling on his thigh and an extensive black bruise between his shoulder-blades.

"I'm afraid I gave you those," Burton primus contritely said.

"Not you, old man," Cyclo answered, with vigour. "I just came by them, some old how, in that jolly old goal-mouth mix-up."

"Decent of you not to blame me," the burly full-back returned, "but I don't mind confessing that we played a waxy game. And we might just as well have gone steady about it, because you'd have beaten us in any case."

"Come on a bit, you Ashes, haven't you, since the Placids put it across you last term?" Burton secundus said. "It won't be nine peas in a pod for them this time."

"You bet it won't," answered Cyclo, with a flashing return to his old egotistical self, "if this puffed-up leg o' mine will only get right by then!"

CHAPTER XXXV

THE SURPRISE OF STRODE'S LIFE

"Oh, be my friend, and teach me to be thine!"
EMERSON: *Forbearance.*

ONE of Blenk's trials in the library was the difficulty of keeping Paddock out of it.

Paddock belonged to that type of newsroom reader who eats oranges, dropping juice on the papers and peel on the floor, while reading out semi-audibly the words beneath pictures and sniggering snuffily over them. He also took delight in asking for books which he knew to be on the topmost shelves, not because he really wished to borrow them, but just to give Blenk the trouble of mounting a ladder to get them. Then they would be "not quite what I wanted, Blenk—sorry," until the librarian "got wise" to his game and declined to bring down the books unless Paddock first went away to wash his hands—a proviso which always choked the Schoolhouse wag off.

The Ashwinnin Complaint and Suggestion Book bore more of Paddock's finger-prints than any other. He was nosey enough to want to see what people were grumbling about, so that he could hang questionable quips upon their grievances when trying to dispel the dullness of Common Room.

On the Tuesday following the Ramsdale match he opened the book as usual, and thus was the first to see an entry of great importance to Schoolhouse—

a suggestion of such an astonishing character, indeed, that he horrified and angered Blenk by tucking the book under his arm and making for the door with it.

"Come back, you swab," the librarian bawled. "Drop that book. It's never to leave this room."

"All right, Blenk, keep your hair on; I'll bring the fellows in to see it instead."

A drove of the size he quickly collected had never before disturbed the library's quietude. It was noisy with incredulity, and Blenk pointed in vain to the cardboard requests for "Silence."

"I ought to have a chucker-out here—a retired boxer, like the pubs have," he bitterly commented. "Sounds like a parrot-dealer's shop."

Ignoring this grumbling, Strode tuned his voice to a higher pitch, and read aloud what Paddock had found in the book. It was in this fashion :—

"We, the undersigned, beg to suggest that Ashwinnin should run a Rugger club as well as a Soccer club next season, as we have just learned that four other schools, within fairly easy distance, have decided to do this. We think there is plenty of room for both codes now that the sports-field extension is in hand, and propose that a meeting to form a Rugger club be held at an early date.

(*Signed*)	W. Gwynn.	T. A. Bexon.
	M. MacAllister.	T. H. Fell.
	L. H. B. Lobson.	A. F. C. Burns.
	Rex Walworth.	O. P. Darton."

Strode's remarks were breathlessly exclamatory, but there could be no doubting that he was profoundly impressed. His surprised eyes shone with a

new light of understanding. He put down the book and turned away, seeming suddenly to find the clamour of wondering voices distasteful.

"I say, Strode," "Wait a bit, Strode," "Here, don't go," the Schoolhouse men protested, tugging at his sleeves; but he thrust them away with impatient force and hurried from the library. Straight upstairs to Bex's study he went, forgetting to knock before bursting in on the head prefect's privacy.

"I say, Bex," he cried, "was that Rugger idea yours or Gwynn's?"

"Gwynn's" came the prompt answer. Bex appeared to be quite prepared for the question.

"Entirely his?"

"Yes."

"But what in the world possessed him——?"

"Look here, Strode, it will save time if I give you the history of the thing right away. Man alive, you've never understood Gwynn. You made it as beastly hard for him as you could, though he gave you every chance to play the game. Don't interrupt me just now, please! What was Gwynn doing all the while you were picking holes in his coat? Hating you for it, blaming you for it, biding his time to kick back for it? Not a bit of it! The serene old boy was writing to this, that and the other school, keeping in touch with the captains, spending a little fortune in stamps, till he saw there was a boomlet in Rugger coming. Then he got the promise of some fixtures for next season if Ashwinnin started Rugger, and all this on the quiet, mind you, with none of us knowing a word about it till he asked us to sign the book. If you think that's the work of a man who wishes you and Schoolhouse ill, Strode——"

But Strode was out and away before Bex could finish his speech. He risked his neck in taking the Schoolhouse steps three at a time, and made towards King's as if the fate of that rival establishment depended on his speed. In the middle of the square, however, he pulled up short with a scraping of soles and heels, for the man he sought was there, talking quietly to a group of Soccer fanciers from both houses.

It wasn't the situation which Strode had pictured—he had hoped to unburden himself in the captain's study, with no one else near—but a splendid impulse, which he never afterwards regretted, moved him to say before everybody the things that were in his heart, and excitedly he held his hand straight out to Wilf as he cried:

"Gwynn, old man, that's a clinking idea you've shoved into the suggestion book. About Rugger, you know, and a club next season. If you don't think I've been altogether too much of a rotten egg, shake hands."

Wilf's hand went out to meet Strode's in unhesitating responsiveness, and there was a little quiver of joyous satisfaction in his voice as he answered:

"Why, Strode, old man, I'm thundering glad of this. Can I leave it to you to call a meeting? We'll all come, of course."

"I can't wait till to-morrow—we'll have it to-night," was Strode's exhilarated decision. "By jove, Gwynn, old man, I *have* been a half-boiled pudding to sulk like a three-year-old all this time. Do—do you think you can spare me a few minutes in your study, just to give me a tip or two for to-night's speech?"

"Come right along now, old man," Wilf heartily responded. "We'll rig something up between us."

Whereupon the captain of the school slipped his arm into that of his old rival and detractor and trotted him along to King's, leaving behind him a group of Ashes who could do little more, in their wonderment at what had happened, than blow out their cheeks and say such commonplace things as "Scissors! What next?"

CHAPTER XXXVI

ENTER RUGGER

"There's a good time coming, boys,
Wait a little longer."

HENRY RUSSELL: *Song.*

THE hastily convened Rugger meeting was a huge success.

Masters and boys unanimously agreed that a school like Ashwinnin, with a roll-call of six hundred men, could comfortably run Rugger and Soccer side by side now that there was a certainty of an extra field to play on and teams to play against, and the Old Man laughed with unalloyed pleasure when he came in to see what the noise was about and found the supporters of the rival codes almost hugging one another in the pride and gladness of reconciliation. The moment there was a chance to make himself heard he climbed the platform and said:

"I promise you the staff's whole-hearted support, boys, in making the Rugger club as successful as the Soccer club is. For it *is* a success (cheers)—a great achievement indeed (louder cheers)—when you remember the dark days through which it passed at first—days of doubt and tribulation which only true grit could have fought with and survived."

Strode and Dennison led the tumultuous cheering which emphasised the Old Man's unqualified praises, and it was Strode who afterwards started a ringing

three-times-three for the captain of school and games, who had never been seen with a redder face than when, in a sudden fit of overwhelming shyness, he rushed to the door and fled to his own house.

Furious with himself for acting so capriciously, he heard later that the full meeting had first stared at and then cheered him for it, and that the Old Man had set them roaring with laughter by telling them how, in his own Sixth Form days, he had bashfully dived under the prize-table rather than receive a medal for the best essay on "Self-confidence and Will Power."

CHAPTER XXXVII

MR. LIDGETT WINS THROUGH

" I do believe
That, while in this old world few things are sure,
Right, truth, and love forevermore endure."
CLARENCE E. FLYNN : *A Creed.*

THE Cyclops of Ramsdale had twice shown up the weakness of Ashwinnin's right half-back, and with him and the inside wing men Wilf did not profess to be satisfied.

Hoping to find stronger players before the return game with Buttingham, he decided to match the two houses in a Wednesday trial game, and had an agreeable surprise when Dennison, Lorimer and Castle all asked if they might be allowed to play.

" I'm rather a hefty brute, Gwynn," Dennison said, " and at inside-right I should be less easy to topple over than Meredith."

" And I'd like a flutter at inside-left," Castle confessed.

" As for me, I'm called a savage beast at right-half when I play hockey," Lorimer said, " so perhaps I'll have enough red blood in my veins to tackle Soccer."

" You shall all three play," Wilf instantly agreed—adding to himself, " they'll give the team ballast, if nothing else."

He did not guess that this was a Schoolhouse plan to repay him for his sportsmanship in suggesting the

introduction of Rugger, and was delighted with the earnest energy which Strode's chums threw into the game. Lorimer especially shone in his devoted attention to Lobby's needs, these two making things warm for Wilf throughout the game, so intelligently did they keep the ball in King's half of the field.

Dennison and Castle bustled cheerfully about and shot a goal each, helping Schoolhouse to win, so that Wilf was able, with a clear conscience, to select all three for the Buttingham match.

This was the first time that Schoolhouse had had more men in the team than King's, and it was a relief to see them "going all out" to prove themselves worthy of the occasion.

Dennison thoroughly enjoyed himself, laughing all over his broad face when one of his strong but erratic shots struck a Buttingham defender and was accidentally turned past the goalkeeper, making the first score for Ashwinnin.

Castle gave the neat pass which enabled Howell to notch the second goal, and then all the new men settled down to take a full share in a scheme of attack which kept Buttingham on the stretch until the final whistle released them.

The Butts were then five goals to the bad, Lobby having scored thrice with the sort of storming shot which the crowd expected of him now, and which he invariably managed to get in sooner or later.

The news of the substantial victory spread quickly to St. Placid's, and caused a sensation there.

The Placids had grown comfortably used to beating every team they encountered, either at home or away, and the fear that their unbroken series of wins might

now be checked by Ashwinnin—a team of all shapes and sizes, a shoddy patchwork of Oddity Boys—put the older school on pins for a time.

Bruce again nipped across in a congratulatory mood —he, at least, could not be accused of having held the Ashes too cheaply of late, for he had foreseen the Titanic struggle to come and given unheeded warnings of it. He now laughingly offered to exchange any man in his team for Ashwinnin's demon outside-right.

"I wouldn't take *two* men for him, Bruce," Wilf was sincere in declaring. "Lobby's the boy to lead your backs a dance when his blood warms up."

"Oh, our backs won't care about him. It's the way he treats goalkeepers that concerns us. Doesn't seem to have the slightest respect for them!"

"Well, old lad, you'll be on your own ground and there's the example of our nine-one licking behind you, so brace up! I'll try hard to keep friendly with you if you score the winning goal."

"Whoever does that will raise a yell worth hearing. Don't let's get nerves by talking too much footer beforehand. Any more news of our Peep o' Day man's case?"

"Not yet. By jove, though, there may be after all! There he is, leaving the Doc's house, and looking as jolly as Friar Tuck! Come along down, Bruce; we'll catch him before he toddles."

The author turned a radiant face on them as they sprinted into the quad.

"Thank goodness, boys, we've won through!" he cried.

"They've found out the truth, sir?" Wilf eagerly inquired.

"Yes, Gwynn. Dr. Kneeshaw called in the crimino-

logist whom we wrote to so often, and they gave loads of time to the job—rummaged about until they came across Sir Daniel's hiding place for the manuscripts he bought of me. It wasn't behind a secret panel, but up the study chimney—an asbestos-lined cupboard, skilfully built into the brickwork. They found all the missing counterfoils of his cheques there, too; and that was the prize packet of the lot, because it contained such items as '£100 for the manuscript of "Motives,"' and cleared me absolutely."

"Hooray!" the boys exclaimed.

Each wrung the happy author's hand warmly as he told them how the slow machinery of the law had been set working to put him right with the world again.

"It will take time," he said, "and some of those who believed me guilty may never hear the other side, but already I have received more orders for books than I shall have time to write in six years. So all's well that ends well!"

He poured out a stream of thanks which they could not stem, and would have been much hurt if they had not each accepted an excellent little watch, specially engraved, as a record of the priceless aid they had given him at the most critical time of his life.

"I had dark thoughts of self-destruction then, boys, but your sunny outlook scattered them. I owe life itself and renewed happiness to my chance meeting with you in Gipsy Meadow. But no—I am wrong," he gravely added; "I should not call it chance; it was the hand of Providence that guided me there—of that I am gratefully sure."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

CYCLO EXTENDS THE OLIVE BRANCH

"A peace is of the nature of a conquest;
For then both parties nobly are subdued,
And neither party loser."

SHAKESPEARE: *Henry IV.*

THE school surgeon said it had nothing to do with the injuries to Lantern's face, but solely to the poor condition of the boy's blood. Guyes was treated in the San for a few days and then allowed to leave, suffering from a tedious disorder which could be treated better in his own home, and Cyclo's manful confession of the fight in the Square was ruled out of the case.

"You may actually have done him a service, Wiske, by giving an outlet to the poison in his system," the surgeon said. "In any event, dismiss it from your mind as a matter of no moment."

"Thank you, sir, but what about Dr. Vollum?"

"Well, what about him?"

"He will give me mustard, sir, when you tell him."

"When *I* tell him? My boy, am I a master? Am I a prefect? More important still, am I a beastly sneak?"

"Why, n-no, sir, but——"

"Less piffle, then. Clear out, you silly boy, and leave me to my own job. That gives me quite enough to do without whispering tales of schoolyard scraps into the bored ears of our sporting headmaster. Stay, though; you're still limping."

"Just a trifle, sir," the grateful Cyclo admitted.

"Off with your boot this minute, sir! Saturday's the date of our terrific match with St. Placid's, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you're still the team's centre-forward?"

"Sure to be picked, sir."

"If you're fit!" the surgeon grimly warned him. "Ah, a little tenderness still—nothing to write epitaphs about. Arnica's the stuff for it; you shall have some if you'll undertake not to drink it. We mustn't take the field a man short, you know!"

In such skilled hands Cyclo's limb was speedily toned up for the great match. Wilf had been anxiously speculating on the possibility of having to play Lobson at centre-forward, which would have meant bringing Millet back into the team at outside-right, but Lobby was an unknown quantity at centre, and Wiske had improved so much in his passing that it would have been a pity to leave him out.

"Mind you, Cyclo," Wilf said, "you'll have to hold your wings together; no trying to rush quite on your own between Shutt and Lavery. If you do, you'll get crocked straight away."

Time was when Cyclo would have been intolerant of advice, but recent events had taught him a much-needed lesson in humility.

"Right you are, Gwynn; I'll remember," he cheerfully answered; then, on a worthy impulse, he added, "Say, would it hip you very much if I called you Wilf instead of Gwynn? Wilf sounds more 'matey.'"

"And I shall like it heaps better, I assure you!" Wilf said, wisely ready to respond to the friendly overtures of an honourable opponent.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A BATTLE ROYAL

"Life's battles don't always go
To the stronger or faster man,
But soon or late the man who wins
Is the fellow who thinks he can."

WALTER D. WINTLE:
It's all in the State of Mind.

NOBODY wanted to stay at Ashwinnin on the sunny March afternoon when the first team played St. Placid's.

The under-masters were rumoured to have drawn lots for the dubious privilege of guarding the school's houses, and the domestics were known to have quarrelled among themselves because even the female members of the staff yearned to see the game.

Boys suspected of "swinging the lead" were now as keen on getting out of the San as they had been to enter it. The Matron suddenly found herself relieved of half her charges, and those who were refused permission to leave were thoroughly disconsolate. They brightened up a little when Old Sheep promised them a series of telephonic reports of the game's progress, a course which entailed self-sacrifice on his part, as he was bound to miss portions of the play during his periodical visits to the 'phone.

"But you mustn't get excited and send your temperatures up," he cautioned them, "or Matron will say I am killing you with kindness."

These ailing boys—nineteen of them—were the only Ashes who did not duly appear on St. Placid's ground in good time for the match. They were robbed by illness of an afternoon's sport, which never wholly faded from the memories of those who saw it. They groaned when the Matron received over the telephone the depressing message that St. Placid's were a goal up after only ten minutes' play. They were not reconciled to this early damper when informed by Old Sheep that he had seldom seen a cleaner or cleverer shot than the one by which Marchmont had opened the scoring.

"Mr. Sheppey says Marchmont tricked three men and then beat Bexon 'to the wide'—whatever that may mean," the soft-voiced and large-hearted Matron said, as she hung up the receiver.

"Don't see why Old Sheep should make such a shout about it," Silloth grumbled. (One is permitted the luxury of outspoken criticism when one is ill!) "Sounds as if he were jumping glad to see the stuck-up Placids score."

The Matron smiled tolerantly. Silly was the only Skylark in the San, and she knew that his heart was out in the open with his lively band of chums, while his body writhed under the restraint which the readings of a clinical thermometer inexorably imposed upon him.

Another fifteen minutes passed in long drawn out suspense, and no further news came over the 'phone.

"That shows we're bottling his precious Marchmont up," Silly inferred. "Goodness, why doesn't he hurry along and *say* something?"

Twenty interminable minutes later the telephone bell rang again, and nineteen elbows supported the bodies of nineteen anxious Ashes as they bent their

heads to hear all they could (and guess the rest) of the conversation over the wire.

"That you, Mr. Sheppey? Yes? This is Matron speaking. Still one–*nil* against us at half-time? How vexing! Even game—both sides as keen as mustard—not a pin to choose between them; yes, I got all that. Rankin saved hot shots from Dennison, Darton, and—and—*who* else did you say? Oh, Lobby, of course! Um? We'll have the wind behind us now, and our men still look fresh—that's nice! Give them the San's best wishes, won't you, Mr. Sheppey, please? We're half out of our skins with excitement, you know. Thanks, so much!"

"Quick, Matron, before he goes!" came the agonised appeal from Silly's bed. "Tell him to tell Blenkie to tell the Skylarks to yell like old steam: 'Play up, you Ashes—hoy, hoo, hay'—like that, Matron. They'll know what I—oh, botheration! He's rung off."

But Blenkie wanted no sickroom reminder of his duty as junior cheer-leader. From the instant that Wilf brought his men into the field again there came from the rear of St. Placid's goal an almost continuous crescendo of cheering, with "hoy, hoo, hay" booming through it at intervals, like the deeper notes of Ashwinnin's tower bells.

Those glorious bells had given the Ashes as thrilling and inspiring a war-cry as any school could wish; chanted fervently by six or seven hundred voices, it uplifted the hearts of the players and set their toes to music, so that they seemed literally to dance round the great men of St. Placid's and run them almost to a standstill.

Shot after shot rattled the cross-bar and shook the

posts, missing the net by maddening fractions of an inch; anything that was straighter served only to reveal the secret of St. Placid's many successes—the amazing agility and infinite resource of Stonewall Rankin, who was a whole Punch-and-Judy show of bewildering knockabout tricks in himself.

Once Cyclo loudly and excitedly appealed against him for jumping up and pulling down the crossbar to let a shot which was beating him pass over it; and, though the referee took no notice, there was a strong impression that an audacious dodge had been successfully practised. It caused a temporary stoppage in the cheering behind the goal, Blenkie and his Skylarks being so sure that Stonewall had cheated that they came to words and then to blows with Chubby's party about it, fighting like game-cocks until forced apart and soundly cuffed by a swaying crowd of seniors, who resented having their feet trodden on when a battle of real importance was being fought out within a few yards of them.

"Well, hang me if I ever saw such luck," Wally groaned. "Anywhere and everywhere does that plaguey ball go——"

"Except between the sticks," a Saint complacently interrupted, finishing the sentence for him. "That's because we keep a goalie loafing around, just in case he is wanted, you know."

"Don't be so chesty about him," Blenk cut in. "I'll bet you a used penny-stamp that he doesn't survive another ten minutes of this."

"Done!" the confident Placid agreed.

It was lucky for him that the bet was only a mimic one, or he would have lost his stake immediately after depositing it.

The fastest and hardest and best directed shots having failed to "get there," it remained for Dennison to mull a lovely centre from Lobson in the most shockingly amateurish manner conceivable, and yet to score ludicrously just because he *had* so badly blundered.

The ball skidded as he clumsily trod on it, and he sprawled full length on the ground without seeing where it went, never dreaming that he had accidentally made the score level until he was dragged to his feet and slapped and thumped and pulled nearly to pieces by his exulting team-mates, with the sound in his ears of a great and gleeful cheer which was half for him and half for Ashwinnin's amazing good fortune.

It wasn't a goal to be proud of, that—no, not at all a goal to write home about—unless of course a fellow wanted to try his skill at making the cat laugh. Rankin's tragic disgust was almost as funny as the goal; he looked like a county cricketer who had let himself be bowled, middle stump, by a "shooter" on a village green.

"Never mind, Stonewall; you couldn't help it," Lavery tried to soothe him by saying; but Rankin was in such a terrible mood just then that he resented consolation by furiously snapping, "Oh, shut up, do," while drop-kicking the ball to the centre-line.

As if to punish such peevishness, in three minutes his goal fell again—not freakishly this time, and not because (as some of the Placids argued) he was too wild to see anything but "red." He succumbed pardonably to Lobby's best shot of the season—a low, fast ball from an acute angle, which spun up the keeper's arm like a Chinese top and swished into the rigging overhead.

Such goals make the magic of football, and Ashwinnin "went suddenly cracked"—behaving like gibbering idiots, as Chubby wrathfully said, when he had scrambled away, still living, from the flock of Skylarks which mobbed and shook and shuttlecocked him, shrieking "hoy, hoo, hay" at him till his ears sang stormily and his head was in a whirl.

How Old Sheep, a 'Varsity Blue, must have grudged leaving the field to telephone news of that great goal to the wriggling inmates of the San! He thereby missed seven minutes of breath-catching play, all in or around his own team's penalty area, with Bruce Marchmont towering above his fellows like a born captain and a leader of men.

"Stop him, Gwynn," "Grass him, Gwynn," "Oh, *Gwynn*," were the almost piteous appeals which trembling Ashes made to Wilf, who was doing everything humanly possible to thwart the cleverness of his friend and rival, yet feared that Bruce would be one too many for him in the end.

If Daddy had only been less slow or more sure—if the halves had only understood the art of packing a goal without getting in a man's way—if Bex had not suddenly lost his nerve in a manner never before charged against him—or if these three embarrassing things could have happened at different times, instead of all at once, then the worried defence could have held out to the last minute without disaster. They did indeed reach the very point when the referee's whistle would have blown for time, but it blew instead for a glaring foul by Lorimer, whose Rugger instincts betrayed him into striking down Marchmont's last despairing shot at goal.

It mattered nothing that the shot lacked pace and

direction—it had received a resounding smack from an Ash's hand in the penalty area, and St. Placid's roared its delight with one voice as the referee darted forward and dug his heel into the fatal mark.

"Time, sir; time—no penalty!" some agonised Ashes wailed.

That futile cry came from spectators who were ignorant of one of Soccer's most important laws, which permits of time being extended for a penalty kick to be taken. Poor Lorimer, abashed by his error, had given St. Placid's a priceless chance to preserve their unbeaten record. One cool, unflurried kick from their captain could reach the net and make the game a draw, and everybody saw that Bruce Marchmont was as calm as a statue at that portentous moment.

Looked as calm as a statue, let us say; in all probability he was as horribly nervous as Bex himself, and neither of them felt worth a pinch of snuff as they faced each other for the last racking test.

A painful hush fell on the throng, enveloping the two principal actors like an invisible cloud; the referee raised a signalling forefinger; Marchmont drew back his foot and shot. And out stretched Bex's arm as though it were telescopically long—out and out and out till his far-flung fingers scraped the ball and twisted it downwards, right to the feet again of the baulked penalty kicker, who banged it into the net with all his force.

Too late, you Placids! Shout you never so hard for a goal, that second kick cannot count as one, for the whistle's shrill blast has followed the first attempt, which was all your captain could lawfully make under the extended time limit.

You may rave and argue until suffocation threatens

you, but your bright record of unbroken victory comes to an end to-day. It is Ashwinnin who can chronicle the match in red letters (unless they prefer to write it in blue and gold) and you who must perforce admit that your neighbours and rivals are not such a misshapen bundle of Oddity Boys as you formerly thought them.

They *can* play Soccer, after all!

CHAPTER XL

THE BEST OF FRIENDS MUST PART

"Fare thee well, and if for ever,
Still for ever fare thee well!"

BYRON: *Fare Thee Well.*

ONE of the spectators who went wildest with joy over Ashwinnin's victory was Tattered Tom.

He looked clean and smart, if considerably less picturesque, in the new clothes which Mr. Lidgett had procured for him, but lost his cap—Pennin's gift—through throwing it up in his excitement, and was much more himself when he had unbuttoned his collar for freedom and waved his tie round his head to celebrate the winning goal and the missed penalty kick.

"I'm going to London on Monday, kid," he told Blenkie after the match.

"What to do there?" Blenkie inquired.

"To live."

"Always?"

"Yes. I've three jobs to go to. One's in a big factory, where they make talking-machine records. I'm to whistle bird tunes into a trumpet or something. Another's in a stoodio——"

"In what, Tom?"

"A stoodio, where you stand about while somebody paints you."

"Oh, I know—an artist's room"

"Yes, in a place called Kensington. They say I'll see sheep and trees and squirrels there, so it won't be so bad, will it? Then, I'm to do whistling solos in a—in a—I forget what they call it, but it's on a lot bigger stage than yours is."

"Corks, you *are* a lucky one!" Blenkie enviously cried. "What about going to school?"

"Oh, I've to do that, too—in between whiles, you know. That's the part I like least."

"You'll like it all right after a bit. What does Gipsy Sim say about it?"

"Oh, who's he, I'd like to know?" Tom contemptuously said. "Only a kid-snatcher! Not my father at all. Owns up hisself—himself, I mean—that he 'found' me before I was lost, and held on to me to get a reward—then took me along of him 'cos nobody claimed me, and he's been takin' it out of me ever since! Mr. Lidgett's goin' to pay him off when he comes out of quod, so I'll be quit of him. Jolly gent, Mr. Lidgett!"

"A topper," Blenkie agreed. "He gave me a shilling once!"

The author did better than that before he left, for he invited Blenkie and all the Skylarks to a sing-song supper in honour of Wilf and Bruce—an event which seemed all the pleasanter for the presence of the Head and the housemasters, who weren't a whit too dignified to join in the choruses like any other fellow.

The supper wasn't in the school, of course, but in Whisperdale's only old eating-house, which made a lot of difference to "letting oneself go." Nobody who wasn't there would have believed that three stern disciplinarians like Volley, Old Maltkin, and the

Gunner could be such merry wags on the other side of Ashwinnin's high gates!

"I shall do all they tell me like a shot in future," was Blenkie's resolve, publicly expressed, "because, you see, they're *paid* to be rotten to us sometimes. Hard lines, I call it, when they'd a thundering sight rather be chummy all round."

"Some men get so bilgy if a master's decent to them," Appy agreed.

"But we won't. No more beak-ragging for us, eh, boys?"

"Not the tiniest touch of it!"

This standard of conduct may have proved too high for the Skylarks to reach at times, but on the whole they maintained it fairly well, and lived to find themselves in the Fifth Form before Wilf and Bex left for college together. By that time the Rugger club, under Strode's enthusiastic guidance, had become as indispensable to Ashwinnin's happiness as the Soccer club was, and gave frantic felicity to those juniors who didn't care a rap which game they watched so long as the Blue-and-Golds set about the opposition in good earnest, which they invariably did, even if they could not treat the spectators to a tearaway victory every week!

"Fifty years from to-day, Bex, when you and I are its oldest Old Boys, Ashwinnin will be in the first ten of Britain's sporting schools," Wilf prophesied.

They had just escaped from the most glorious send-off that two popular house-leaders could ever hope to have, and were inwardly congratulating themselves on having somehow managed to fight back the tears of mingled pride and regret which had so often risen to their eyes.

"Yes, old lad," Bex wistfully responded, "and we shan't half revel in telling the young 'uns how we kicked off against wind and rain and slope, so to speak, and got a team of winning Ashes nicely going in the end!"

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